# Thomas Traherne's "Centuries of meditations": the Quality of Liberation.

## Thesis

UNRESTRICTED

# THOMAS TRAHERNE'S "CENTURIES OF MEDITATIONS": THE QUALITY OF LIBERATION.

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Offered for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy,
Discipline of Literature, 1986.

Date of Submission: November 1985
Date of Award: 19.8.86

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Thesis Abstract

The thesis commences with a study of selected meditations from the "Centuries", highlighting central ideas concerning liberation: the meaning of childhood innocence, the social implications of the liberation process, and the nature of Traherne's "Felicity". Traherne's attitude towards the loss of innocence during adulthood and the possibilities of sinfulness arising from human freedom emerge as problems in interpretation crucial to a proper judgement of the quality of liberation.

The second section examines the spiritual and cultural context of Traherne's achievement. The special position of his work as related to both traditional scholasticism and the new learning is evident; awareness of this leads to a clearer understanding of his originality and dialectical method - "Highest Reason".

Next I look at the inspiration of Traherne's writing, uncovering in both form and content more evidence of his insistence on human freedom, both unconscious and conscious. I analyse the meaning of this freedom and its relationship to human desire - crucial to Traherne's thought.

The following section, in which I discuss Traherne's views on sin, suffering and guilt, contains a brief survey of relevant critical literature. I go on to analyse Traherne's treatment of the unpleasant aspects of existence in the light of such criticism, finding that he has a profound understanding based upon his insistence on the central position of human consciousness: the subject of liberation.

Comparison between Traherne's writings and those of two broadly contemporary thinkers - Henry Vaughan and Gerrard Winstanley - establishes

further both Traherne's individuality and the extent of common ground. The robust and radical nature of his thought is further emphasised, although the socially radical element may well exist by implication rather than in explicit activity.

The final section attempts to tie together the various strands of thought I have outlined, and finds, in the Psalms of David, Traherne's avowed spiritual model of joyous celebration.

CONTENTS

# Thomas Traherne's "Centuries of Meditations": The Quality of Liberation

## 1. An Introduction: Selected Meditations from "The Centuries".

I propose to begin this treatise with a detailed study of two groups of meditations from Traherne's "Centuries" which exemplify and highlight what I perceive to be the major themes of Traherne's thought and the essentially liberating quality of his writing. Such an initial study may also serve to establish the "flavour" of Traherne's prose stylistically, for it is always important to bear in mind that in Traherne we are not dealing with the exposition of an abstract philosophy but rather with the evocative and poetic expression of spiritual liberation albeit based upon a "divine philosophy" worked out in exhaustive detail by the writer. It is part of my purpose here to discover the nature of this liberation; it is sufficient at this stage to mention that Traherne intends to liberate the reader from the social and religious constraints which prevent him from realising the infinite, through the positive expansion of consciousness. The first group of meditations that I select constitutes what appears to be the most directly autobiographical sequence in the "Centuries": C3,1-8, describing the spiritual quality of Traherne's childhood vision, his subsequent "apostasy" and then the arduous recovery of innocence on a higher plane of understanding than previously possible during childhood. The second, smaller, group of meditations I wish to examine actually precedes the first in the order of the "Centuries" - C1,28-30 - but because these meditations deal with the nature of Traherne's mature understanding once achieved - "felicity" itself - they seem to me appropriate and powerful expressions of Traherne's adult spiritual perception.

C3,1 establishes immediately Traherne's sense of childhood insight into "this sublime and celestial greatness"[1] described in the final meditation of the previous Century and through the recall of this insight we can perceive Traherne's idea of human nature as divine initially and, what is more important, potentially. In a sense, nothing experienced can ever die: the wonder of innocence is a constant possibility throughout adulthood as the basis for further spiritual development and remains the saving grace of man. In this insistence on human potential defining the divinity of human nature, Traherne's thought comes close to the spiritual wisdom of the much earlier "Cloud of Unknowing" which probably had a profound influence on Traherne. The anonymous writer of the "Cloud" affirms God's mercy. "For it is not what you are or have been that God looks at with his merciful eyes, but what you would be"[2]. For Traherne, however, the mystic possibilities inherent in man are directly linked to what "you...have been":

> "Will you see the infancy of this sublime and celestial greatness? Those pure and virgin apprehensions I had from the womb, and that divine light wherewith I was born are the best unto this day, wherein I can see the Universe. By the Gift of God they attended me into the world, and by His special favour I remember them till now". (C3,1).

Through his insistence on this divine wisdom and vision which are, as we shall see, above the concerns of a prescriptive morality, Traherne is able to transform the entire theological argument between the claims for original sin and original innocence and raise the issue onto a

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[1]Thomas Traherne, "Centuries", edited by H.M. Margolioth with introduction by Hilda Vaughan, London (Mowbray), 1960. This edition used henceforth.

[2]"The Cloud of Unknowing", ed. Clifton Walters, Penguin Classics, 1963, p152. Although Traherne does not mention the work, it was, by the seventeenth century, widely read by both Protestant and Roman Catholic students of Divinity; Traherne, it seems likely, read the work while at Oxford

higher, more immediate level of perception which is, however, frequently misconstrued as some form of blissful ignorance. It is one of my intentions here to demolish such a misconstruction. Traherne frequently and passionately asserts that life is a precious gift - a "Gift of God", in fact - and it is no accident that the word "gift" appears three times in this meditation, reinforcing the sense of value, wonder and gratitude which is so elusive in life yet which permeates Traherne's work so thoroughly. Memory is invoked to provide the basis of the projected recovery of innocence, and this invocation is itself divinely inspired through God's grace, for it is "by His special favour I remember them now". (C3,1). Traherne's symbolism, always characteristic of his work and serving to reinforce the timeless and universal quality of his vision, is clearly asserted through the Adam/I archetype - elsewhere expanded to include Christ also - at this early stage of memory recall: "Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world, than when I was a child". (C3,1). Liberation from the fears and insecurities of normal adult consciousness, it seems, is possible if man can successfully recall with humility and intelligence an earlier frame of mind which must, to a greater or lesser degree, have been shared by all mankind. Paradoxically, Traherne seems aware in his writing of the severe limitations of the written word in this context; thus his implicit belief in an education of the entire sensibility far beyond mere instruction, for the "pure and virgin apprehensions" are "unattainable by book, and therefore I will teach them by experience". (C3,1). The combination of highly evocative writing with this acute awareness of its status as inferior to actual lived experience gives Traherne's prose a taut, purposive quality. The general tone set by this meditation is entirely typical: that of proffered guidance and compassionate help from a position of sincere humility.

The second meditation of the third Century moves into a more explicit description of the mental state through which Traherne saw the world in his infancy:

> "All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. I was a little stranger, which at my entrance into the world was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys". (C3,2).

There follows a skilful exposition of the central paradox of this belief - that divine knowledge is possible in infancy, necessarily a state of worldly ignorance. The terms "knowledge" and "ignorance" Traherne cleverly and aptly juxtaposes: "My knowledge was Divine" - surely the highest possible form of knowledge for Traherne - and yet, "My very ignorance was advantageous". (C3,2). The immediate problem is self evident: in such a state of knowledge as has been suggested, what sort of ignorance can exist, let alone be actually advantageous? Traherne goes on to define more fully his "ignorance":

> "I knew not that there were any sins, or complaints or laws. I dreamed not of poverties, contentions or vices. All tears and quarrels were hidden from my eyes. Everything was at rest, free and immortal. I knew nothing of sickness or death or rents or exaction, either for tribute or bread". (C3,2).

To the modern reader, a spiritual vision based upon ignorance of such things would appear distinctly escapist; indeed it is a fairly widespread criticism of Traherne that he possessed a rather rose-tinted view of the world verging upon the fatuously optimistic and delusory, as we shall see later. However, closer examination of the text reveals that Traherne's logic is rigorous, and that there is certainly no hiding from the more unpleasant aspects of reality. At no time does Traherne plead for a return to exactly the state of mind he possessed during childhood, however powerfully evocative his writing is of this state. There is no sense of nostalgia or yearning for past ease, but rather an

intense sense of purpose. Ignorance of the ways of the world may well have been beneficial in fostering the divine sense during infancy, the necessary condition for the growth of the human spirit at that particular stage, but to recover innocence at an adult level entails a thorough understanding of all aspects of existence through the proper use of the key concept of "highest reason", which we will examine in greater detail below. It is only when we keep this firmly in mind that it is possible to agree that "Traherne ... carries to an optimistic extreme the Augustinian conviction that the divine image lies within man's memory, to be recovered and restored by meditation"[3]. Furthermore, when we examine more closely exactly what the infant Traherne was ignorant of in order to enjoy such blissful vision, we find that most of the mentioned unpleasant aspects of life are products of man's misuse of life. There is in this meditation an implicit criticism of the social conventions and norms of Traherne's day, which is developed to radical effect elsewhere in the "Centuries". It is principally such negative concerns which for Traherne cloud the child's pure vision, and he is acutely aware of normal adult consciousness in his concluding thought for this meditation: "Is it not strange, that an infant should be heir of the Whole World, and see those mysteries which the books of the learned never unfold?" (C3,2).

It is apparent in this meditation that for Traherne the process of liberation has both negative and positive qualities, the former rooted in the past and the latter always looking to the future. It is, in fact, both liberation from - this is its negative, past-based aspect - and liberation for - its purposive and positive aspect. In its aim and

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[3]Louis Martz, "The Poem of the Mind", Oxford U.P. 1966, p47.

fulfilment, liberation means the state of being in which Traherne found himself "entertained like an Angel with the words of God in their splendour and glory". (C3,2). On the other hand this sense of freedom cannot for the adult mind be enjoyed until the negative aspect has played its part, releasing the mind from domination by those things which would hinder the development of such entertainment: sins, complaints, laws, poverties, contentions, vices, sicknesses, death, rents or exactions - the majority of which are symptomatic of an exploitative and materialistic social order. Nevertheless, Traherne's exaltation of innocence remains a problem for the modern mind, accustomed as we are to dwelling on the problems and suffering of the world. How are we to judge the innocence by which Traherne sets such great store when it seems to rely on seeing only selected things? Death itself is certainly not a mere product of the social order, and does not the consciousness of death itself immediately destroy innocence? It is a problem central to the idea of liberation in Traherne's work, as I have hinted above. It may well be that innocence, for Traherne, is essentially a way of seeing the world, concerned not so much with the object of perception but the subject - the way in which the world is perceived; certainly such an interpretation is very helpful in any attempt to come to terms with Traherne's philosophy. Seeing innocence in such a way may well help us also to understand the need, in Traherne's time and now, for a careful nurturing of innocent perception in infancy, even if this does mean a sheltering from the harsher side of life.

If the process of liberation does indeed involve freedom from a situation rooted in the past, together with freedom in its ideal form projected into the future, as I am suggesting, the apex of both is

Traherne's experience of the eternal present which is in itself able to realise the grandeur of eternity and infinity. The central idea here is notoriously difficult to express in words, yet is fundamental to all mysticism: it amounts to the mental possession of the infinite in all creation by each human sensibility, even when the immediate object of perception itself is by normal standards insignificant. The infant is capable of this level of perception precisely because lesser mental attributes have not yet become dominant. Thus for the infant Traherne, "All Time was Eternity and a perpetual Sabbath". (C3,2).

These crucial ideas, which could be conveniently termed "infinite possession", are given concrete expression in some of the most evocative and beautiful prose of the "Centuries" in the third meditation of the third "Century". This passage typifies the general movement of Traherne's expressed thought, moving as it does from the perception of the actual world, to conceptual reflection upon the meaning of this perception and finally to an emphasis on proposed activity. Simultaneously to each of these three stages, the meditation moves from the past, recalled through memory, through the present, with the emphasis on analysis and possible meaning, to the future course to be taken. Traherne's prose here concentrates on the real experience of the world, given heightened and ecstatic expression through the sparkling, jewel-like clarity of the writing, achieved precisely because the emphasis is on this "felt" reality rather than on any conventional or customary vehicle for poetic experience - the "gilded metaphor" abjured by Traherne in the introductory poem of the Dobell Folio, "To the Critical Peruser"[4]. Thus, "The corn was orient and immortal wheat,

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[4]Thomas Traherne, "Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings", ed. A. Ridler, Oxford U.P., 1967.

which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things". (C3,3). It is the marvellous combination of the immediate experience, which must strike a chord in all who remember childhood, with the heightened spiritual expression which proves so effective here. Traherne goes on to recall with joy his vision of the street, ordinary people, boys and girls and the city itself, all given dramatic impact through his realisation that infinity is to be perceived everywhere and in everyone: "Eternity was manifest in the Light of Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared..." (C3,3). The senses here are light and swift, adding to the impression of intense freedom, for "Traherne believed that one of the best ways to express gratitude to God is by right and appreciative use of the senses"[5]. If the senses are liberated, so too can be the objects of these senses, to such a degree that the world itself becomes paradisical: "The city seemed to stand in Eden, or to be built in Heaven". (C3,3). The implications of this realisation, as we shall see later, are immense.

The source of this inspiration is in the existential sense of aloneness, with the individual sensibility as the gateway to felicity. Thus the word "mine" is repeated several times as this meditation develops, and, like so much of Traherne's mystical thought, the concept is

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[5]Anthony Low, "Love's Architecture: Devotional Modes in Seventeenth Century English Poetry", New York, 1978, p282.

paradoxical: it is through the denial, or rather transcendence, of the materialist conception of "mine" in property and social relationships that true possession of the infinite is achieved. As a child, Traherne "knew no churlish properties, nor bounds nor divisions: but all properties and divisions were mine". (C3,3): child-like perception is, it seems, able to encompass and thus transcend the divisions and boundaries so familiar to the adult world.

The corruption of this childhood innocence, when it is recalled later in the same meditation, is mentioned only briefly, even abruptly - seemingly an unwelcome interruption of Traherne's insistent rhythms of spiritual development and expansion. If there is an explanation for the corruption, it is not here made explicit but rather implied in the description of what innocence does not countenance: the "properties" and "divisions" noted above. The "dirty devices of this world" are learned "with much ado". (C3,3), and Traherne is careful to show that "this" world is far from the same thing as "the" world mentioned in ecstasy previously as the infant's birthright, the world belonging naturally to each and every person and evoked so brilliantly by Traherne. The poem which comprises the following meditation summarises Traherne's train of thought, expressed in terms of thanksgiving to God for restoring child-like vision to the fallen adult Traherne and emphasising the need for grace to accomplish this restoration:

> "O Lord, I wonder at Thy love,
> Which did my infancy so early move:
> But more at that which did forbear
> And move so long, though slighted many a year:
> But most of all, at last that Thou
> Thyself shouldst me convert, I scarce know how."
>
> (C3,4)

It is important to note that for Traherne liberation of this kind cannot be achieved through his own efforts alone, and requires the element of God-given grace, working in harmony with the underlying desires even of the unregenerate adult - although this harmony of forces cannot actually be appreciated in full until felicity is achieved:

> "But now, with new and open eyes,
> I see beneath, as if I were above the skies,
> And as I backward look again
> See all His thoughts and mine most clear and plain.
> He did approach, He me did woo;
> I wonder that my God this thing would do". (C3,4).

The poem ends on the note of veneration for innocent childhood vision with which it started, and the full meaning of Traherne's espousal of this vision is developed and expanded in the following two meditations.

The fifth meditation of C3 commences with thoughts on the quoted words of Christ: "He must be born again and become a little child that will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven". (C3,5). Traherne is careful to distinguish between the commonly held adult view of childhood, through which innocence is characterised by "a careless reliance upon Divine Providence" and by "the feebleness and shortness of our anger and simplicity of passions,". (C3,5), and the element of childhood vision which, according to Traherne, approaches the divine. Although the former two qualities may well be attractive to the care-worn adult, they are not sufficient basis for a mystic realisation of the infinite; rather, this is to be found "in the peace and purity of all our soul". (C3,5). As Traherne pursues this crucial observation, the reader becomes aware of the profound yet simple social message contained in his advice that "it is requisite that we should be as very strangers to the thoughts, customs and opinions of men in this world". (C3,5). It is significant here again that Traherne should be referring to "this" world - the fallen, unregenerate world created by men.

Human society as it has evolved is diametrically opposed to vision, for it is concerned with material accumulation and competition only, with "Ambitions, trades, luxuries, inordinate affections, casual and accidental riches invented since the Fall", (C3,5), all serving ultimately to blind man to the truth just as "Grit in the eye or yellow jaundice will not let a man see those objects truly that are before it". (C3,5). Throughout the meditation Traherne very effectively juxtaposes this sense of man's false values - and the reference to these in terms of a physical disease is a judgement to which we will return - and the purity of the child's natural apprehension of the truth which for Traherne must be the basis of liberation from social norms and false values: "For we must disrobe ourselves of all false colours, and unclothe our souls of evil habits; all our thoughts must be infant-like and clear; the powers of our soul free from the leaven of this world, and disentangled from men's conceits and customs". (C3,5). The emphasis throughout is of a sense of natural innocence which seems to anticipate Rousseau's in its vehemence. The optimistic, idealistic yet profoundly experiential tone of Traherne's prose convinces the reader that such vision is potential in all of us and encompasses both social and divine elements, unseparated and Eden-like in purity: "God in His works, Glory in the Light, Love in our parents, men, ourselves, and the face of Heaven: Every man naturally seeing those things, to the enjoyment of which he is naturally born". (C3,5). The following meditation sets out clearly the direction that Traherne will ask his reader to follow: that of self-examination, through the example of Traherne's own life: "...by what steps and degrees I proceeded to that enjoyment of all Eternity which now I possess I will likewise shew you. A clear and familiar light it may prove unto you". (C3,6).

In marked contrast to Traherne's ecstatic vision of recalled childhood, we learn from the seventh meditation of his "apostasy", the disappearance of such innocence and entry into the adult world: "The first light which shined in my infancy in its primitive and innocent clarity was totally eclipsed". (C3,7). It is significant here that Traherne chooses the word "eclipse", suggesting as it does a merely temporary absence of the source of light as opposed to complete disintegration; further, that the source itself remains intact and if only that which hides it could be removed it could once again serve its purpose. The reasons for this "eclipse" are couched by Traherne in entirely social terms:

> "If you ask me how it was eclipsed? Truly by the customs and manners of men, which like contrary winds blew it out: by an innumerable company of other objects, rude, vulgar, and worthless things, that like so many loads of earth and dung did overwhelm and bury it: by the impetuous torrent of wrong desires in all others whom I saw or knew that carried me away and alienated me from it: by a whole sea of other matters and concernments that covered and drowned it: finally by the evil influence of a bad education that did not foster and cherish it". (C3,7).

Thus Traherne centres on the false values of society, but the reader is left with a rather awkward doubt concerning the nature of childhood vision, if it can, apparently, be so easily "eclipsed" by false values and relationships. Traherne, in fact, admits to the weakness of the child's visionary perception in terms of his own experience: "I was little and reverenced their authority; I was weak, and easily guided by their example: ambitious also, and desirous to approve myself unto them". (C3,7). We must, however, realise that the brittle nature of Traherne's first insight lies not in the insight itself but in the infant's lack of strength to retain it against the sheer weight of numbers and authority utterly opposed to it. This particular type of weakness, essentially a lack of staying power, seems to be one of the chief

characteristics of childhood, and, in this context, it may well stem from a failure to realise just how negative and unsatisfactory is the alternative - the adult social order. The possibility remains that it is part of the nature of innocence to try anything and to be led anywhere; given the weight of social pressure to conform as the child grows, perhaps this inquisitiveness makes the individual's fall from grace socially inevitable. Certainly Traherne's fall seems to have been complete: "...my thoughts...were blotted out; and at last all the celestial great and stable treasures to which I was born, as wholly forgotten, as if they had never been". (C3,7).

There follows in the ensuing meditations a further discussion concerning the nature of the fall and the disastrous effect of socialisation. Traherne is radical in his social criticism, and seems to emphasise the relative importance of this socialisation as opposed to any hereditary defect in man's nature, for

> "... our misery proceedeth ten thousand times more from the outward bondage of opinion and custom, than from any inward corruption or depravation of Nature: And that it is not our parents' loins, so much as our parents' lives, that enthrals and binds us". (C3,8).

It is interesting to note here the imagery of physical captivity, in contrast to the great sense of freedom, both intense and expansive, evoked by Traherne's descriptions of the child's world.

Yet immediately after his condemnation of "our parents' lives" comes what seems to be a rather difficult compromise, possibly stemming from the apparent dichotomy between such radical social criticism and Traherne's adherence to the Church of England's doctrine of original sin, as expressed unequivocally in the "Thirty-Nine Articles":

> "Original Sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk;) but it is the fault or corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the Offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone Original Righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to Evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation"[6].

Traherne indeed affirms, immediately after the passage quoted previously, "Yet is all our corruption derived from Adam: inasmuch as all the evil examples and inclinations of the world arise from this sin", (C3,8), which seems to contradict his previous standpoint stressing the social causes of man's bondage. The reader is left with the suspicion that Traherne may be trying, perhaps somewhat awkwardly, to reconcile his own experience of childhood insight and its subsequent corruption with a doctrine which insists, at least since the defeat of the Pelagian heresy at the hands of adherents to Augustine's version of Christianity, on the validity of original sin. It is indeed a thorny problem. However, even socially transmitted wrong habits and delusions must have a source somewhere, and the myth of Adam's fall with the consequent tainting of man is, perhaps, the appropriate solution to Traherne's central problems: how does the child develop into the man of sin and greed, and how can this same man recover innocence? The first of these problems, evidently, is not to be solved by asking whether sinful man gives birth to a sinful society or vice-versa, but rather by cutting across the false dichotomy between the individual and his social and cultural environment through the incisive use of the dialectical method. This is the area which I will be examining in greater detail below, emphasising, I hope, the nature of Traherne's views on sin and suffering in order to clarify the path of liberation

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[6]"The 39 Articles", from "The Book of Common Prayer" of the Church of England, Cambridge University Press.

outlined by him. Clearly, if we are to free ourselves of false values, the "new" innocence at which Traherne would have us aim must have a rather more robust nature than that of the child, must be fully aware of the implications of every thought and deed, and must take into account, as does Traherne himself, the weight of sin and suffering in the world.

The rewards, according to Traherne, are great: indeed, "present felicity, especially the contemplative experience, is the closest that the state of grace comes to the state of glory in this life"[7]. Nowhere is this felicity more beautifully or evocatively expressed than in the twenty-eighth, twenty-ninth and thirtieth meditations of the first Century. Here we have the delight in the infinite perceived throughout creation so characteristic of Traherne's vision, together with further delight that such a vision can be shared with others. The group of meditations require quotation in full:

> "Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven: see yourself in your Father's Palace: and look upon the skies, the earth, and the air as Celestial Joys: having such a reverend esteem of all, as if you were among the Angels. The bride of a monarch, in her husband's chamber, hath no such causes of delight as you". (C1,28). "You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world". (C1,29). "Till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels: till you are as familiar with the ways of God in all Ages as with your walk and table: till you are intimately acquainted with that shady nothing out of which the world was made: till you love men so as to desire their happiness, with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own: till you delight in God for being good to all: you never enjoy the world. Till you more feel it than your private estate, and are more present in the hemisphere, considering the glories and the beauties there, than in your

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[7]A. Low, op cit. p287.

> own house: Till you remember how lately you were made, and how wonderful it was when you came into it: and more rejoice in the palace of your glory, than if it had been made but to-day morning". (C1,30).

Given the quality of such a vision, the intensity of the "infinite possession" we noted earlier expressed in marvellous poetic form, it is small wonder that Traherne bemoans in the next meditation man's blindness: "There is so much blindness and ingratitude and damned folly in it. The World is a mirror of infinite beauty, yet no man sees it". (C1,31). In order to shed greater light onto the quality of Traherne's liberating ideas, we shall now examine more closely the meaning of his work in two associated contexts: the tradition of ideas that he inherits, and contemporary religious attitudes complementary to his own.

## 2. The Mystic Tradition and Seventeenth Century Context.

As I have tried to show in the examination of selected meditations from the first and third "Centuries", Traherne's vision of man is of a being fundamentally healthy, innocent and even, potentially at least, God-like in his enjoyment of infinite freedom of consciousness. Yet, for the most part, this vision of man remains potential and ideal, for the adult sensibility has been corrupted by socially fostered wrong habits and customs, perhaps stemming from an original propensity to experiment without realising the consequences of such action. It is important, I think, to note that Traherne is not a thinker for whom intuition outweighs reason, however crucial the child's intuitive grasp of freedom is as a central tenet of the "Centuries". Rather, intuition and reason complement each other. Traditionally they are opposed, but in Traherne's philosophy there is "a practical co-operation of the two faculties in a union that sidesteps the whole perennial controversy"[8]. Traherne stresses the role of what he terms "Highest Reason" in the path of liberation from false values, in the sense that unless a person can recognise the intellectual and rational validity of such a path and its goal of felicity, he is unlikely to consider intuitive flashes received in adulthood of any real value. Intuition may well provide the original impetus, but intellect is of the utmost value in building onto any insight a grasp of true knowledge. Thus Traherne emphasises the need for contemplation as a prerequisite of experience:

> "The contemplation of eternity maketh the soul immortal. Whose glory it is, that it can see before and after its existence into endless spaces. Its Sight is its presence. And therefore is the presence of the understanding endless, because its Sight is so". (C1,55).

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[8]Francis King, "Thomas Traherne; Intellect and Felicity", in "Restoration Literature: Critical Approaches" (Ed. H. Love), London, 1972, p125.

The "understanding" is for Traherne the visionary faculty, and throughout the stages of spiritual realisation it is able to provide a clear intellectual picture of the true possibilities inherent in human nature as a basis for actual liberation from the bonds of false notions and values: a sort of intellectual map for the mental journey. As a result of the extensive scholarship carried out during the twentieth century, we can be sure that Traherne's voice was not untutored, neither was it isolated from movements of contemporary thought nor from the mystic tradition. In fact, Traherne was highly educated and traces of an extremely wide intellectual background can be found throughout the "Centuries". However, as Traherne himself implies in his autobiographical note on his own Oxford education, such learning must have purpose outside of itself, a unifying and cohesive structure and meaning: "We studied to inform our knowledge, but knew not for what end we so studied. And for lack of aiming at a certain end we erred in the manner". (C3,37). The "end" so important to Traherne must indeed be the felicitous, unfettered understanding of eternity.

In claiming this essential, if generally unrealised, nature of man, Traherne is interested in providing a counter to the predominant culture of his time, and again the social impact of his philosophy is clear. Patrick Grant's excellent study[9] has shown just how radical was Traherne's opposition to contemporary "guilt culture", that set of socially and religiously accepted values inspired by Augustinian theology and emphasising the inheritance of guilt passed down from the original Fall, a paternalistic and authoritarian Church structure as the only means for attaining salvation, and reliance on externally bestowed or

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[9]Patrick Grant, "The Transformation Of Sin", Montreal and London, 1974.

withheld grace as against the individual's own personal vision and rational good sense. Grant traces Traherne's thought in this context from Saint Irenaeus through such Renaissance philosophers as Pico della Mirandola and Ficino who represent a humanitarian, tolerant and visionary opposition to guilt culture. In this respect, Grant interprets the Reformation as itself an integral part of the guilt culture, despite its general insistence on the reality and validity of the individual's conscience, "a reactionary movement ... it reasserts a traditional guilt culture consciousness in the face of a threatening enlightenment"[10]. Thus, as we have seen, the Anglican Thirty Nine articles firmly espoused the idea of original sin, and Traherne's belief in this aspect of the theology of a Church of which he was, as far as we can tell, a devout and faithful member, must be open to some measure of doubt. Grant himself, as he develops his theme in relation to the thought of Traherne, goes on to find traces of the Pelagian heresy and in this respect links him with Henry Vaughan in opposition to earlier religious poets John Donne and George Herbert with their frequent stressing of human guilt:

> "Donne and Herbert remain in essence medieval [whereas] the special energy of Vaughan and Traherne comes from their enlightenment attempts to find spiritual models to replace the Augustinian guilt-culture, and in both poets we find tendencies towards what might look like Pelagianism"[11].

Certainly the reader cannot fail to be struck by the sense of uninhibited joy in existence - the perception of life as a divine gift which I noted earlier - throughout the "Centuries", and it is this sense, in opposition to social reality, which provides both the basis and end of Traherne's quest.

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[10]P. Grant, ibid. p30.

[11]P. Grant, ibid. p39.

It is important to see such an intellectual exercise within the context of the Christian mystical tradition to which Traherne belongs, and of the intellectual climate of Traherne's own time:

> "a period of social and political ferment; a time of religious upheaval, when the crust of habit and ancient traditions was broken through by a wave of strong religious emotion. The nation passed through a distinct crisis of incubation, a creative epoch in its life attended by an extraordinary release of energy"[12].

In Traherne's work can be seen the synthesis of old and new visions of the world. Here, perhaps, lies the essential impulse giving rise to his writing: Traherne's acute sensibility lies at the apex of conflicting, powerful ideas, reacting creatively; a spark of light emitted on the collision of two worlds - for such, in essence, they were. On the one hand we have the intricate world of traditional scholasticism with its emphasis on the divinely inspired checks and balances manifest in creation, and its spirit of other-worldliness. On the other hand we have the robust and, towards the authority of this tradition, irreverent new learning of the seventeenth century: rationalistic and investigative, the embryo of modern scientific pragmatism and its attendant materialistic world-view. In Traherne there is conflict, and there is a certain creative resolution.

In Traherne's hands the mystical tradition of scholasticism, including such concepts as the essential unity of micro, geo and macro-cosms, the intricate system of correspondences throughout creation and the underlying notion of circulation, is transformed by what Marjorie Hope Nicolson has aptly termed his "aesthetics of infinity"[13]. If we look at the similarities between Traherne's thought and that of the scholastic

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[12]Rufus M. Jones, "Studies in Mystical Religion", London, 1909, p449

[13]Marjorie Hope Nicolson, "The Breaking of the Circle", New York, 1960, p201.

tradition, we can see that Traherne was concerned ultimately to use what was valuable as the basis of his transforming vision. The ancient idea according to which man occupies the central point of convergence of micro, geo and macro-cosms through the agency of his potentially infinite consciousness is absolutely crucial to Traherne's philosophy. According to the traditional view, which became couched in incredibly complex terms as the centuries of scholastic learning wore on and the thought became ever more esoteric, the detailed and intensive study of the minute could lead to a perceptive understanding of the entire creation. The micro-cosm, which was apprehended in the abstract since measurement of the infinitesimally small was impossible, contained within itself the essence of the organism of the created world - the geo-cosm - and ultimately of the total universe - the macro-cosm. The universe could be divided into the intellectual or angelic, the celestial, and the terrestrial or elementary, all three of which corresponded in man respectively to the soul, the mediating spirit and the body respectively. Through an elaborate system of typology, all levels in a strictly hierarchical structure were, according to scholastic theory, organically linked. Even a cursory glance at the "Centuries" will discover the profound influence on Traherne of such ideas. The meditations from the first Century previously examined echo the notion of man's consciousness as the unifying force for all creation, and this feeling permeates the entire span of the "Centuries". In the preceding meditation to the group studied, (C1,27), the idea of the micro-cosmic/macro-cosmic unity is made even more clear through the combination of the smallest visible particle of creation and the vastness of God Himself, the meditative technique of synecdoche: "You never enjoy the world aright, till you see how a sand exhibiteth the wisdom and power of God...". (C1,27). The concept, and the imagery itself,

look forward to the perception of a later visionary and poet, William Blake, so often so similar to Traherne, who wrote:

> "To see a world in a grain of sand,
> And heaven in a wildflower.
> To hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
> And Eternity in an hour"[14].

Perhaps even more radically, and certainly more surprisingly, such ideas seem also to anticipate some ideas of modern science: particularly the organicist theories which stress the organic unity of the world and have moved significantly away from the previous mechanistic and entirely materialistic standpoint.

However, it is important to realise that Traherne was not a scholastic in the traditional sense. As we shall see, he was fascinated and heavily influenced by contemporary ideas, and it may well be that the liberating force of his prose derives not from scholasticism itself but rather its transcendence. Certainly, the intricate and ultimately tautological webs of late scholasticism, so castigated by Francis Bacon and his followers, are not Traherne's concerns. In fact, his visionary power and clear sense of purpose enable him to cut through the often meaningless detail, unrelated as it frequently was to actual immediate experience, and to perceive beneath, the primary value of a system of thought whose explanations were all given in terms of the forms, qualities, origins and ends of things; in other words the very aspects of creation which demand examination from a profoundly religious philosopher like Traherne.

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[14] William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence", in "Poetry and Prose of William Blake", (edited Geoffrey Keynes), Nonesuch, London, 1969, p118.

The traditional source and inspiration of much of his thought is made clear by Traherne himself through his frequent quotation throughout the "Centuries" of the Bible, and with particular relevance here, Hermes Trismegistus and Pico della Mirandola in the group of meditations of the fourth Century, commencing with the seventy-fourth and finishing with the eighty-second. These meditations are centred around the intensely scholastic yet potentially liberating assertion as to the nature of man, itself taken from the Bible:

> "O Adam, we have given thee neither a certain seat, nor a private face, nor a peculiar office, that whatsoever seat or face or office thou dost desire thou may'st enjoy. All other things have a nature bounded within certain laws; thou only art loose from all, and according to thy own council in the hand of which I have put thee, may'st choose and prescribe what nature thou wilt to thyself. I have placed thee in the middle of the world, that from thence thou mayest behold on every side more commodiously everything in the whole world. We have made thee neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, that being the honored former and framer of thyself, thou mayest shape thyself into what nature thyself pleasest!". (C4,76).

Such freedom does not, however, exist in a vacuum, and Traherne is able to develop such a philosophy through his careful and imaginative use of a closely related traditional doctrine: that of "circulation". Briefly, the doctrine perceives a unity in all creation based upon the unbroken nature of the circle and circular movement evident throughout creation. The inspiration of both Hermes Trismegistus and Pico is instrumental in Traherne's particular formulation of the idea. Marjorie Hope Nicolson has discussed in detail the traditional significance of the circle in her appropriately titled study[15], in which she quotes Thomas Browne, contemporary of Traherne and in many respects similar: "God is a circle, whose Circumference is nowhere and whose Centre everywhere". Traherne himself is able to view creation in similarly

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[15]Marjorie Hope Nicolson, op cit. p47.

paradoxical yet incisive terms, a combination of the structured mutual interdependence of all parts familiar from scholastic doctrine, and an openness and freedom of spirit alien to such a system of ideas. For Traherne, circulation is very closely related to the imaginative vision:

> "Creatures that are able to dart their thoughts into all spaces can brook no limit or restraint; they are infinitely indebted to this illimited extent, because were there no such infinity, there would be no room for their imaginations; their desires and affections would be cooped up, and their souls imprisoned... Nothing is in vain, much less infinity. Every man is alone the centre and circumference of it. It is all his own, and so glorious, that it is the eternal and incomprehensible essence of the Deity". (C5,3).

In Traherne's hands, the basic idea comprehends the interdependence of the physical world and leads to the unity of Creator and creation - a unity dynamic and of infinite variety, through which man in prayer and praise given freely to God can receive the gifts of God in an eternally circular motion.

Thus the frequent references in the "Centuries" to spheres and to circulation - the sun, the reflection of light back to its source, the flowing of water through rivers to the sea from which it ultimately comes - have powerful symbolic significance, transforming the material world into its full spiritual reality:

> "The world within you is an offering returned, which is infinitely more acceptable to God Almighty, since it came from Him, that it might return unto Him. Wherein the mystery is great. For God hath made you able to create worlds in your own mind which are more precious unto him than those which He created; and to give and offer up the World unto Him, which is very delightful in flowing from Him, but much more in returning to Him. Besides all which in its own nature also a Thought of the World, or the World in a Thought, is more excellent than the World, because it is spiritual and nearer unto God. The material world is dead and feeleth nothing, but this spiritual world, though it be invisible, hath all dimensions, and is a divine and living Being, the voluntary Act of an obedient Soul". (C2,90).

In Traherne's world-view, all creation and Creator are mutually interdependent; the social aspect of this interdependence is the basis

of his ethical code, as is evident from the ideas expressed in "Christian Ethicks", and itself derives from the essential unity of divine and earthly. The familiar development of thought from concentration on the physical through the symbolic to the fully spiritual can be found in the poems of the Dobell Folio. The paradoxical perception of a unity at once tightly spherical and infinite, Traherne expresses succinctly in the poem "My Spirit":[16]

> "Twas not a Sphere
> Yet did appear
> One Infinit.
> 'Twas somwhat evry where." (p30,l.94-96)

The poem aptly entitled "The Circulation" develops the possibility from the particular to the universal:

> "No Man breaths out more vital Air,
> Then he before suckt in", (p45,l.15-16)

the apparently simple truth of the bodily function of the inhalation and exhalation of Breath, to

> "All Things to Circulations owe
> Themselvs; by which alone
> They do exist..." (p46,l.29-31)

Through a complete understanding of the spherical and circulatory nature of the universe man is destined, ultimately, to transcend it. In the poem "Felicity" Traherne expresses this striving towards complete understanding, again in symbolic terms, implying not only the expansion of consciousness beyond the furthest spheres of the universe, but intellectually and imaginatively the attainment of a consciousness through which man's own position in the system can be clearly seen. Thus,

> "Your understanding comprehends the World like the dust of a balance, measures Heaven with a span, and esteems a thousand years but as one day. So that Great, Endless, Eternal Delights are only fit to be its enjoyments", (C1,19).

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Such understanding is the key to Traherne's conception of the universe and man's place in it; an understanding excited by seventeenth century scientific investigation but able to go well beyond the purely intellectual. To return to the poem "Felicity", Traherne answers his own fundamental question:

> "What is there which a Man may see
> Beyond the Spheres?
> FELICITY". (p81,l.7-9)

For many seventeenth century poets and thinkers the idea of circulation as the essence of existence died with the coming of the new analytical philosophy, and many were unable to countenance such a death without feeling intense despair. John Donne, whose early spiritual perception he expressed evocatively in such poems as "The Exstasy", was never able to recover from what he felt to be the breaking of the circulatory unity of man and God, and his later poetry expresses his despair. The powerful impact of the new scientific outlook upon a sensibility rooted in the ideals and notions of an age profoundly unscientific, for all the apparent modernity of Donne's style, is nowhere better exemplified, for "to Donne the poet, the new philosophy had given the death blow to that beauty which was symmetry, proportion and harmony"[17]. For Traherne, on the other hand, new life and freedom could be breathed into a concept certainly not outmoded in its essential message, through the power of man's will to transcend all bounds by a thorough understanding of them; a release from the finite and enclosing, whereby "the sphere of the speaker's being is always expanding, as times and places are swallowed up by eternity and the infinite"[18], and man's will becomes the centre and end of all things. Love itself,

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[17]Marjorie Hope Nicolson, ibid. p120.

[18]Stanley Stewart, "The Expanded Voice: The Art of Thomas Traherne", San Marino, California, 1970, p120.

infinite and truly compassionate, becomes the circumference of the new circle which does not enclose: the unifying force which binds together the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as Traherne explains lucidly in that group of meditations culminating in number forty-six of the second Century:

> "To be the fountain of joys and blessings is delightful. And by being Love God is the Fountain of all worlds. To receive all and to be the End of all is equally delightful, and by being Love God receiveth, and is the End of all". (C2,46).

In the aspects of his philosophy outlined above, Traherne is similar to several other seventeenth century visionaries, notably that loose circle of learned men known to posterity as the Cambridge Platonists. Traherne, as we have seen, was far from disheartened by the new discoveries of Science; he was in fact exhilarated by the ideas of infinite space and eternal time, by the infinitesimal examination of the workings of all created things, and by the use of man's rational powers to discover new truths and levels of reality. The scope of Traherne's philosophy is significant, for "his work reflects the broadened training of the scholar at mid-century, not only in the rational theology of "Christian Ethicks", but also in the wide range of literary and scientific interests"[19]. The Cambridge Platonists, although generally stressing more than Traherne the purely rational modes of thought, had similar interests and ideas. Primary amongst these is the attempt to achieve a "unified sensibility" based upon the full, operative awareness of the whole personality. "These writers are capable of analysis, but also of resonant emotional utterance. This flexibility and this organic richness of sensibility which permit of verbal playfulness and dread seriousness at the same time are marks of what we may justly call a

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"unified sensibility". Such a sensibility, achieved briefly and vividly in a group of poets and prose writers of the mid seventeenth century, was not a residue of the Middle Ages but a product rather of the post Renaissance and post Reformation world as that world temporarily sought a balance and reconciliation of old and new"[20]. It is always important to remember that Traherne is primarily a philosopher of "Felicity", and however much he was deeply affected by the discoveries of the new science and the implications of the new philosophy he was ultimately concerned not with the measurement of space and time but with the sense of value to be discovered in this state of "Felicity" - the infinity of man's consciousness rather than of the material universe. This latter sense of infinity - the apparently objective - can only be given life and meaning by its apprehension by the subjective imagination, without which it remains the endless void of time and space posited by materialistic science and so thoroughly vilified by William Blake over a century later, from a viewpoint with which Traherne would surely have sympathised:

> "The same dull round, even of a universe, would soon become a mill with complicated wheels... The desire of Man being Infinite, the possession is Infinite & himself Infinite... He who sees the Infinite in all things, sees God. He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only"[21].

Traherne, in fact, stresses that the infinity of consciousness can only be realised through a thorough appreciation of the finite nature of matter and the inter-relationship of all creation. On that basis is built Traherne's philosophy:

> "the capability of the human imagination to grow with the universe, the capacity of the human soul to be filled yet still aspire for more beyond - such was Traherne's gospel: a release from the finite and enclosing"[22].

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[20]H. Fisch, "Jerusalem and Albion", London, 1964, p39.

[21]W. Blake, op cit. p148.

[22]M. Hope Nicolson, op cit. p201.

It is precisely this philosophy which can ultimately lead to the liberation of man's consciousness, and in an important sense links the old with the new mode of thought: inter-relationship in the context of expansion towards the infinite. At least one critic has objected to Traherne's attitude towards scientific thought, Francis King having written that "Traherne was engaged not in scientific enquiry but in the compulsive search for material for felicity"[23], and going on to criticise the resulting "confusion of ideas" resting upon an unprincipled eclecticism. In fact, as I have tried to show, Traherne is always striving for a creative synthesis of old and new, and of subjective and objective, in order to free man from subjection by any system.

The same attempt at creative synthesis can be found when one examines Traherne's relationship to the established tradition of Christian meditation and to what Barbara Lewalski has characterised as the emerging Protestant meditative mode of Traherne's own age:

> "the typical Protestant procedure is very nearly the reverse [of the Ignatian]: instead of the application of the self to the subject, it calls for the application of the subject to the self - indeed for the subject's location in the self"[24].

Certainly this appears to be true of Traherne, for whom human consciousness is always primary, and there is also apparent a very Protestant emphasis on the direct and highly personal use of Biblical text as the spiritual basis for the individual's own activity, and on activity itself as the eventual and direct outcome of contemplation. The pervasive spirit of Traherne's "Centuries" suggests far too joyous and explicit a love for the created world than would be countenanced

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[23]Francis King, op cit. p127.

[24]Barbara Lewalski, "Protestant Poetry and the Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric", Princeton U.P., 1979, p172.

by the Ignatian mode of meditation although, as Miss Lewalski makes clear, there is a considerable deviation in Traherne's system of meditation and thought from mainstream Protestantism; it owes a great deal to neo-Platonic models peripheral to Christianity - although central to the mystic tradition - transmitted through such figures as Hermes Trismegistus and Pico della Mirandola. Ultimately, Traherne's thought is unique to himself. The meditative sequence characteristic of both Traherne's poems and the prose "Centuries" is one which commences frequently with a statement of feeling, intuitive and often powerfully felt, as with the recall through memory of childhood attitudes towards the world, and progresses from there to a consideration of this feeling - its relationship to the adult consciousness both subjectively and objectively - moving from this phase to a plea for active enjoyment of life and other people's enjoyment. This final enjoyment Traherne terms "felicity".

It is, however, important not to over-emphasise the Protestant element in Traherne's writing. As I have noted, his essential concern is to synthesise creatively, and his vision is always opposed to the dominant line of development in Protestant theology of later seventeenth century England, a development leading inexorably to a rationalistic deism as exemplified by the philosophy of John Locke. Harold Fisch finds the Hebraic influence on Traherne far greater than contemporary Protestantism, and often in terms opposed to orthodox Protestant theology[25]. This can be seen in Traherne's emphasis on the freedom of the will, and the implied diminution of the role grace plays in spiritual

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[25]H. Fisch, op cit.

liberation, in his participation in and joyous celebration of the created world as against the puritanical disdain for human pleasure, and in his insistence that rationality should never be seen as the end of life, but rather as a means towards the attainment of "felicity". Certainly one of the most obvious influences on the "Centuries" is to be found in Traherne's admiration of the Hebraic psalms of David, an admiration which leads to extensive quotation and celebration:

> "When I saw those objects celebrated in his Psalms which God and Nature had proposed to me, and which I thought chance only presented to my view, you cannot imagine how unspeakably I was delighted to see so glorious a person, so great a prince, so divine a sage, that was a man after God's own heart, by the testimony of God himself, rejoicing in the same things, meditating on the same, and praising God for the same. For by this I perceived we were led by one Spirit, and that following the clue of Nature into this labyrinth, I was brought into the midst of celestial joys..." (C3,70).

It is indicative of Traherne's essential nature that he should choose the most poetic section of the Bible as the model for his own felicitous experience and as the inspiration for his awakening to the spiritual unity of mankind. Praise and thanksgiving, the motive of the Psalms, are also the force behind the "Centuries". In these respects Traherne can again be likened to Thomas Browne, in that "for them [Thomas Traherne and Thomas Browne] poetry and in particular the poetry of the Bible gives a clearer view of reality than does mathematical demonstration"[26]. As we have seen previously, the Protestant Reformation could be an intensely reactionary and guilt emphasising movement and as such is entirely alien to the progressive and liberating nature of Traherne's message.

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[26]H. Fisch, op cit. p274.

Ultimately, of course, the mystical apprehension of reality is beyond the internal divisions of Christianity, and the poetic expression of mysticism is perhaps best seen as non-denominational. Possibly, indeed, Traherne's position is at the head of such a tradition:

> "... the great tradition of English meditative poetry that arose in the latter part of the sixteenth century ... died at the death of Thomas Traherne in 1674, with both his prose meditations and their companionate poems unpublished"[27].

This view appears also too limiting, however, and on reflection it seems that Traherne's philosophy as expressed in the "Centuries" is both derived from his education in the traditional and contemporary wisdom, and is dynamically separate from it. To return to the image with which I began this examination of Traherne's position, the spark of light emitted by the collision of the two worlds is substantially of neither: it is a product, but a creative and illuminating product, ephemeral, intuitive and expressing the truth of actual experience. Where then, if not solely in his cultural roots, are the essential impulses leading to such a flash of light to be found?

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[27]L. Martz, op cit. p72.

3. The Inspiration of the "Centuries".

A sense of urgency in the spreading of joyous news permeates Thomas Traherne's "Centuries" and other writings - this is one characteristic which cannot fail to strike even the most casual reader. It is in many respects difficult to discern the impulses, the hidden springs, which have led to artistic creation when we have, as in the case of Traherne, virtually only the finished work as evidence, for very little biographical information survives and nothing, outside the prose and poetry themselves, of any explanation Traherne himself may have offered. Yet it is possible that this very paucity prevents any confusion; certainly we are not misled into trusting the teller rather than the tale. Further, Traherne is assuredly not an artist for whom obscurity is a virtue, however complex is the nature of his thought; rather, he himself makes it clear that his purpose is to speak plainly without any superfluous embellishments of "curling metaphor" (in the poem at the beginning of the Philip Traherne manuscript), and Traherne's "naked style is effective for showing the naked truth, awakening and cleansing man's perceptual and imaginative powers"[28]. The essential impulse which inspires Traherne throughout is the desire to show the world as it might be to all men, for "the WORLD is unknown, till the Value and Glory of it is seen: till the Beauty and the Serviceableness of its parts is considered". (C1,18).

Thus Traherne's purpose to shed light on darkness, enabling man to see truly, is everywhere apparent in the "Centuries" and the symbolism of light, traditional and central to mystical experience and its expression,

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[28]A. L. Clements, "The Mystical Poetry of Thomas Traherne", Harvard, 1969, p38.

is used throughout the work, and in the earlier "Meditations on the Six Days of Creation", where Traherne makes use of the Biblical creation-myth in celebratory terms:

> "The very first Word God spake, he created Light, and so not only drove away the Darkness from the Face of the World, but illustrated the Heavens and the Earth with Splendour and Joy, and brought to all Things a beautiful Appearance...".

Contrasted to the darkness of man's misery, "This Light is the Beginning, Growth and Increase of all Goodnesse". The experience of spiritual rebirth expressed in terms of light in darkness appears several times in the Bible, probably Traherne's greatest single influence, notably on the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts, 9,3) and the glorious vision of Ezekiel. Its symbolic power is apt for Traherne's needs: to show existence as pure, fresh and wondrous. The light of vision - "that divine light wherewith I was born. .." (C3,1) - is for Traherne both an inner and an outer force, and in fact it is a major part of light's symbolic power that it eradicates distinctions: the limiting and binding distinctions between the self and the created world, between the spirit and the senses, and ultimately between man and God. The absence of light, conversely, is portrayed by Traherne as absolute desperation, loveless and in bondage as the souls described thus:

> "They were made to love, and are dark and vain and comfortless until they do it...but when they shine by Love upon all objects they are accompanied with them and enlightened by them". (C2,48).

For Traherne, the imagery and actual sensuous experience of light are fundamental, as indeed they are for many of his contemporaries of the loose neo-Platonic school who shared his belief in direct Divine inspiration and illumination. Throughout the prose of the "Centuries", it is the shimmering glistening light shining on the objects of the

everyday world which transforms them, as we have already discovered in the intensely evocative descriptions of the world in the third Century, where "Eternity is manifest in the Light of Day". (C3,3). Light renders the dullest object jewel-like, and Traherne's frequent references to jewel-like qualities is entirely appropriate. Aldous Huxley has theorised that the basis of man's love for bright and sparkling jewels is as a reminder of a lost but dimly remembered perceptive power through which all objects shone and glistened:

> "the ruby or the emerald is like the transparent fruit which the Mystic sees encrusting the rocks and architecture of the visionary world ... Not only are gems valuable to us because they remind us what goes on in the visionary world, they also, by themselves, induce a kind of vision"[29].

Traherne would surely have agreed; we have his own, jewel-like prose as evidence, and the idea of possible recovery of lost vision is central to his thought.

The sun, giver of light in the temporal world, becomes in Traherne's imagination a powerful and life-giving symbol of the Divine. In nature, the sun has the same relationship to life as God has to the spirit: the sun gives life and light yet needs nature to manifest this gift; so God needs man's spirit to manifest His own gift of love. Traherne explores this symbolism initially in the "Meditations on the Six Days of Creation":

> "Now see, my Soul, how this glorious Light resembles thy Creator, and is the greatest Sign and Symbol of Divinity in all Nature, by which thou art more clearly, 0 Lord, known unto Men, than by any other Creature, being the very Shadow of the Divinity. It is the most Pure of all Bodies, it shines upon a Dunghill, yet returns undefiled"[30].

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[29]Aldous Huxley, "The Human Situation", London, 1978, p232

[30]T. Traherne, "Meditations on the Six Days of Creation", ed. G. Guffy, Augustan Reprint Society, Los Angeles, 1966, First Meditation.

It is indicative of the sun's significance in Traherne's scheme of things that when in the "Centuries" he begins his practical advice for the meditation which will lead to felicity, he focuses on the natural power of the sun:

> "Suppose the Sun were absent, and conceive the world to be a dungeon of darkness and death about you: you will then find his beams more delightful than the approach of Angels: and loath the abomination of that sinful blindness, whereby you see not the glory of so great and bright a creature, because the air is filled with its beams. Then you will think that all its light shineth for you, and confess that God hath manifested Himself indeed, in the preparation of so divine a creature". (C2,7).

There follows a whole series of meditations which consider various aspects of the sun's importance in the natural order of creation essentially a combination of immense power with measured restraint - which culminates in a creative and liberating leap from the natural and literal to the symbolic and spiritual:

> "The Sun is but a little spark of His infinite love: the Sea is but one drop of His goodness. But what flames of love ought that spark to kindle in your soul: what seas of affection ought to flow for that drop in your bosom!". (C2,14).

As the symbolism of the sun and of light generally is explored further by Traherne, we see the development of its full significance as a unifying force, through which the soul is conceived of as a mirror reflecting this light, yet shining with it. Again, this is traditional mystical symbolism. Saint Bonaventure, a seminal influence on Traherne, uses it frequently in his major work "The Soul's Journey Into God":

> "When, therefore, the soul considers itself, it rises through itself as through a mirror to behold the blessed Trinity of the Father, the Word and Love".

For Traherne, the symbolism is extended further, as the soul becomes an integral part of the infinite and dynamic circular movement between man and God:

> "For as the Sun-beams illuminate the air and all objects, yet are themselves also illuminated by them, so fareth it with the powers of your soul. The rays of the sun carry light in them as they pass through the air, but go on in vain till they meet an object: and there they are expressed. They illuminate a mirror, and are illuminated by it. For a looking glass without them would be in the dark, and they without the glass unperceived". (C2,78).

Ultimately, the process leads to the fusion of the soul with its Creator, in total freedom from all alienating barriers:

> "Like light from the sun, its [the soul's] first effigies is simple life, the pure resemblance of its primitive fountain, but on the object which it meeteth it is quickly changed, and by understanding becometh all Things". (C2,78).

This is, in effect, the very essence of Traherne's message.

To summarise, then, Traherne's use of the imagery and symbolism of light is fourfold: to emphasise the intense impact of wondrous revelation; to symbolise, through the sun as the natural source of life, the power of God's love; to show the essential similarity between the soul - the light within - and God Himself - the light without; and to blur and finally dissolve the alienating distinction between man and God. It is possible that the experience of such illumination gave Traherne the original impulse to seek felicity, although he is always aware that such an outcome can only arrive after a long process of discovery. Indeed the dangers of exposure to the full power of light before readiness are apparent to Traherne, who would, I think, have agreed that "to show the light to nocturnal birds is to conceal it from them, since it blinds them and is darker to them than darkness"[31]. Understanding and illumination must complement each other. Indeed, total reliance on direct illumination is not a feasible stance, however important such illumination may be in the whole process of liberation.

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[31] M. A. Ewer, "A Survey of Mystical Symbolism", London, 1933, p42.

As early as the second meditation of the first Century Traherne expresses his intention to explain fully the presence of "som great thing" of which everyone feels vague, even unconscious, intimations, "as iron at a distance is drawn by the loadstone". (C1,2). When examined carefully, such an assertion contains by implication two highly important tenets of Traherne's philosophy: firstly, the belief in an objective reality outside of man's consciousness - in particular, a spiritual reality, and secondly a belief in the existence of a portion of the human mind shared by all yet lying outside the realms of the individual's normal consciousness - at least for the unregenerate. The former belief must be stressed as important, for it has been suggested that Traherne espouses views either entirely solipsist or self-obsessed[32]. Certainly, the overwhelming impression gained from reading the "Centuries" is of a testament of self-discovery and self-renewal, yet this is precisely because it is man's own consciousness which is in need of the crucial adjustment and is therefore the right subject - indeed realistically the only subject - upon which to concentrate. The desire for this enlightenment, however, stems from the possibility of its realisation: the intimation of the reality of "som great thing". In this sense, "the presence of the impulse to find Felicity is a guarantee of the existence of felicity"[33].

The idea of a desire strong in man's soul yet unconscious, for which Traherne uses the loadstone symbol, is, in fact, complementary to the idea of an objective spiritual reality. In effect, Traherne wishes to

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[32]Notably and in varying degree by Evelyn Underhill, Francis King and Ronald Hepburn.

[33]A. L. Clements, "The Mystical Poetry of Thomas Traherne", Harvard, 1969, p33.

emphasise that we are not necessarily what we think we are, and in this perception he anticipates Carl Gustav Jung, analytical psychologist, who observes,

> "For thousands of years, rites of initiation have been teaching spiritual rebirth; yet, strangely enough, man forgets again and again the meaning of divine procreation ... the penalty of misunderstanding is heavy, for it is nothing less than neurotic decay, embitterment, atrophy and sterility"[34].

As for Jung so for Traherne there is an overwhelming need to make conscious man's deepest urges and desires. This consciousness of what has been hitherto only feebly felt is important precisely because man can then become free from domination by the unconscious; can attain, in other words, self knowledge. Traherne's startling insight into the human psyche permeates his entire work: given the reality of "som great thing" and the more or less unconscious desire for union with it, ultimately no other thought or activity can satisfy the human soul. The unredeemed adult self is alienated both from Creator and from creation; it seeks satisfaction in many ways, all of which are in the end doomed to failure. Traherne, however, posits the possibility of the discovery of felicity, whereby the alienated self can be submerged by its own union with all creation: all things exist in it, and it exists in all things. That is the real meaning of Traherne's seeming preoccupation with human consciousness at the expense of 'objectivity'.

Traherne writes with true compassion for those of his readers as yet still alienated from such a union, even for those in the state of complete spiritual ignorance and doubt. As with the entire body of his philosophy, such compassion stems from Traherne's own experience, for he himself experienced his own "apostasy", as recounted in the third

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[34]C. G. Jung, "Modern Man in Search of a Soul", London, 1961, p142.

"Century" and in several of his poems - a period of intense doubt, desperation and even fear. There are times when Traherne's writing gives the distinct impression of a truly pastoral figure: a wise parent guiding the child through a difficult, if necessary and entirely inevitable, stage in his development. Traherne's purpose is, clearly, to encourage and stimulate the reader's nascent spirituality by showing that the truth is always present:

> "Till therefore the mists of error, and clouds of ignorance, that confine this sun be removed, it must be present in all kingdoms and ages virtually, as the Sun is by night, if not by clear sight and love, at least by its desire. Which are its influences and its beams, working in a latent and obscure manner on earth, above in a strong and clear". (C2,73).

Such a formulation should certainly be sufficient to demolish any charge of solipsism! The symbol of the sun as divine truth refers directly to the development of symbolism of light and darkness examined previously. The struggles of each individual have their own symbolic quality, in that the path followed by the whole of mankind since creation, through the Fall and thence to the possibility of redemption by Christ, is re-enacted in the consciousness and life of each person. Traherne's own experience has its place in the symbolic structure, for the micro-cosmic struggle towards the light he underwent serves in its turn to illuminate the needs and possible direction of his readers, even of mankind generally. It is, essentially, the quality of compassion which is most instrumental in linking microcosm to macrocosm, as it unifies all experience, and it is precisely because Traherne had experienced absence of vision that he is able to guide his readers compassionately. One never has the impression of self-righteousness on reading his work, even in the overtly moralistic "Christian Ethicks". Such self-righteousness would indeed only serve to alienate many from Traherne's message, and its absence is certainly notable.

The inscription on the first leaf of the "Centuries" expresses Traherne's guiding impulses succinctly - the impulses to give freely of loving assistance and to stimulate the desire for enlightenment:

> "This book unto the friend of my best friend
> As of the wisest love a mark I send
> That she may write my Maker's praise therein
> And make herself thereby a Cherubim".

It is important to realise that the kind of help offered by Traherne is not aimed at simply making life more comfortable; indeed, the implications of his advice suggest a radical breaking of habits - always an uncomfortable experience. Indeed, "to Traherne contentment was a sleepy thing. His soul was wide awake, conscious of its power to expand with the infinity and eternity in which he found the true felicity"[35]. If this true felicity is radically different from normal, everyday contentment it is necessary to clarify what Traherne comprehends by felicity, for in it lies the key to his philosophy of life. A selection of references from the "Centuries" may here speak for themselves:

> "But it is an happy loss to lose oneself in admiration at one's own Felicity, and to find God in exchange for oneself". (C1,18);
>
> "All which you have here, GOD, THE WORLD, YOURSELF, ALL THINGS in Time and Eternity being the objects of your Felicity, God the Giver and you the receiver". (C2,100);
>
> "... a glorious though an unknown thing ... That there is a Felicity, we all know by the desires after, that there is a most glorious Felicity we know by the strength and vehemence of those desires". (C3,56);
>
> "Felicity must be perfect, or not Felicity". (C3,57);
>
> "Felicity is the perfect exercise of perfect virtue in a perfect life. [Traherne here quotes Aristotle.] For that life is perfect when it is perfectly extended to all objects, and perfectly sees them, and perfectly loves them: which is done by a perfect exercise of virtue about them". (C3,68);

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"Felicity is amiable under a veil, but most amiable when most naked". (C4,13);

"0 infinite liberality of God the Father! 0 admirable and Supreme Felicity of Man!". (C4,76).

If we examine this series - although, of course, they only form a series in the order of my selection, and the separate context of each quotation must be borne in mind - we can at least determine what felicity is not: it is not in any sense a withdrawal from the world, or from anything else. It seems to be, rather, that state of mind in which God is perceived as both immanent and transcendent, and yet is beyond experience in its normal sense, with its implications of separation between experience and experiencer. The final quotation from the above series suggests that felicity is the human attribute closest to God's "infinite liberality", and the penultimate shows clearly that Traherne is concerned with openness and honesty as opposed to that mysteriousness often confused with mysticism. Traherne's felicity is, in fact, as we can see from the group of meditations of the third "Century" centring around the quotation from C3,36 above, that "som great thing" posited in the second meditation of the entire work.

Yet despite, or indeed because of, Traherne's clarity of perception and insistence on open felicity, a sense of mystery remains dominant in his work, as an infant-like wonder at existence. It is in fact this sense of wonder to which Traherne wishes us to awaken: the wonderful mystery is for Traherne not why we exist, or what is perceived through existence, how we function; rather, it is that we exist at all to wonder at these matters. We must be careful to distinguish between the innocent childlike wonder of such a vision and a shadowy delight in mysteriousness for which esoteric philosophy is frequently mistaken. In the sense outlined, mystery is central to Traherne's clarity of thought

and perception - his desire to bring light into darkness. The problem remains of whether such wonder, as seems to be the case during childhood, depends entirely on newness, which by its very nature will disappear through the progress of time. To phrase the problem another way, does wonder depend on a kind of beneficent ignorance? It seems to me that for Traherne time is relative to eternity, and once eternity is perceived all existence is perpetually new and therefore wondrous. This vantage point is, of course, common to all mystic philosophers - witness Thomas a Kempis, whom Traherne acknowledges as a profound influence: "If your heart be right, then every created thing will become for you a mirror of life and a book of holy teaching. For there is nothing created so small and mean that it does not reflect the goodness of God"[36]. Knowledge itself under such circumstances becomes infinite, as Traherne points out in his axiomatic assertion: "The contemplation of Eternity maketh the Soul immortal". (C1,55). In the "Centuries", there is on occasion a certain exasperation with people's blindness in not perceiving the world as truly theirs, in not seeing the true wonder of creation: "How vile are they, and blind and ignorant, that will not see every one to be the heir of the world, for whose sake all this was done." (C2,34). It is the possession of the universe by the individual consciousness that is the basis of Traherne's mystical experience, and this experience is founded, as we have seen in the examinations of meditations from the third "Century", in his childhood perception: actual and inspiring. Given the quality and power of such vision, and the realisation that it is within everyone's capability, it is hardly surprising that at times Traherne becomes impatient with the closed, or at least limited, view of his fellow men.

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[36]Thomas à Kempis, "The Imitation of Christ", translated and introduced by L. Shorley-Price, Penguin, 1952, p72.

The impatience, in my view, stems from Traherne's wholehearted desire to enable others to accomplish his own level of liberating insight, for

> "O what a holy and blessed life would men lead, what joys and treasures would they be to each other, in what a sphere of excellency would every man move, how sublime and glorious would their estate be, how full of peace and quiet would the world be, yea of joy and honour, order and beauty, did men perceive this of themselves, and had they this esteem for one another". (C2,93).

Yet people remain, in Traherne's words, "deluded with a show instead of pleasure"[37], constantly confusing impressions gained from the surface appearance for reality itself. For Traherne, this unfortunate delusion stems from social conditioning: false sets of values instilled into children at an early age. It is interesting in this context to read Traherne's advice to parents and nurses, at once practical and idealistic,

> "to magnify nothing but what is great indeed, and to talk of God to them, and of His works and ways before they can either speak or go. For nothing is so easy as to teach the truth because the nature of the thing confirms the doctrine: As when we say the sun is glorious, a man is a beautiful creature sovereign over beasts and fowls and fishes, the stars minister to us, the world was made for you, etc. But to say this house is yours, and these lands are another man's, and this bauble is a jewel and this gew-gaw a fine thing, this rattle makes music etc. is deadly barbarous and uncouth to a little child; and makes him suspect all you say, because the nature of the thing contradicts your words ... To teach him those objects are little vanities, and that though God made them, by the ministry of man, yet better and more glorious things are more to be esteemed, is natural and easy". (C3,11).

Again we can see clearly how a false and binding world-view stems from a sense of property ownership and relationship through adult-inspired conditioning. However, we must always bear in mind that for Traherne childhood is not the ideal state, although it may hold the

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[37]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks: The Way to Blessedness", edited and introduced by Margaret Bottrall, London, 1962, p23. This edition used henceforth.

seeds of felicity within it. As we have noted previously, the vision may be there, but not the strength to sustain it in the face of social pressure. Thus, in the same meditation quoted from above, Traherne notes that the negative impact of adult experience upon the child's vision serves to "blot out all noble and divine ideas, dissettle his foundation, render him uncertain in all things, and divide him from God". (C3,11). Traherne is aware that the state of experience, of the fall, has to be worked out in every person, and it is only through the arduous path of "Highest Reason" that original innocence can be recovered, but on a higher and unassailable plane. The veil dividing reality from delusion is a thin one, yet is firmly in place, the point of Traherne's poem "Shadows on the Water": Traherne's acute consciousness of the nearness yet seeming vast distance away of such a perception of reality is, it seems to me, the central impulse which gives rise to his writing of the "Centuries", "as of the wisest love."

If the ultimate aim of such a process is the infinite consciousness of complete freedom, it is also necessary to insist upon and become fully aware of each individual's freedom as an integral part of the process leading to such an end. For Traherne the existential choice facing man is indeed central to his presence on this earth, and he follows the example of many Christian mystics - notably St. Irenaeus, St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure and Meister Eckhart, and to some extent Pelagius - in stressing the freedom of the will. However, this freedom is not absolute or divorced from man's social and cultural situation; it depends on the level of consciousness attained by the individual in the circumstances he finds himself in. Thus, despite the occasions of exasperation noted above, there is a general lack of condemnation in Traherne's work of those who fail to grasp their freedom, alőngside his emphasis on the power of socially induced habits and conditioning.

Central here is Traherne's own experience, as outlined in the third "Century", the crucial moment of choice only gradually emerging from the darkness of his "apostasy". We can follow this emergence through illuminating flashes of insight, expressed by Traherne in terms of the symbolism of dream and reality. We take up the autobiographical section of the "Centuries" shortly after we left it previously at the eighth meditation of the third "Century":

> "Yet sometimes in the midst of these dreams, I should come a little to myself, so far as to feel I wanted something, secretly to expostulate with God, for not giving me riches, to long after an unknown happiness, to grieve that the World was so empty, and to be dissatisfied with my present state because it was vain and forlorn". (C3,15).

As Traherne relates subsequent experiences, they take on a more positive nature and give the reader an effective self-portrait of the youthful enquirer:

> "Sometimes I should be alone, and without employment, when suddenly my Soul would return to itself, and forgetting all things in the whole world which mine eyes had seen, would be carried away to the ends of the earth". (C3,17).

The frequently fearful quality of such a revelation is also not shirked by Traherne, as he shows in a passage which evokes superbly the existential "angst" of relinquishing the security of the familiar self:

> "Another time in a lowering and sad evening, being alone in the field, when all things were dead and quiet, a certain want and horror fell upon me, beyond imagination. The unprofitableness and silence of the place dissatisfied me: its wideness terrified me: from the utmost ends of the earth fears surrounded me". (C3,23).

It is significant that on recovery from the experience Traherne, reflecting on its import, realises that his own enlightenment and the freedom to pursue it depend utterly upon the entire world:

> "I was a weak and little child, and had forgotten there was a man alive in the earth. Yet something also of hope and expectation comforted me from every border. This taught me that I was concerned in all the world: and that in the

> remotest borders the causes of peace delight me, and the beauties of the earth when seen were made to entertain me". (C3,23).

The culmination of these and similar experiences arrives when Traherne unites positively the quality of freedom with the power and purpose of the will, through making the fully conscious decision to devote his life to the cultivation of felicity in himself and others. The appropriate meditation requires complete quotation, poetically communicating as it does the joy and simplicity of Traherne's life:

> "When I came into the country, and being seated among silent trees, and meads and hills, had all my time in mine own hands, I resolved to spend it all, whatever it cost me, in search of happiness, and to satiate that burning thirst which nature had enkindled in me from my youth. In which I was so resolute, that I chose rather to live upon ten pounds a year, and to go in leather clothes, and feed upon bread and water, so that I might have all my time clearly to myself, than to keep many thousands per annum in an estate of life where my time would be devoured in care and labour. And God was so pleased to accept of that desire, that from that time to this, I have had all things plentifully provided for me, without any care at all, my very study of Felicity making me more to prosper, than all the care in the whole world. So that through His blessing I live a free and a kingly life as if the world were turned again into Eden, or much more, as it is at this day". (C3,46).

For Traherne, the freedom of the will, enabling such a momentous and joyful decision to be taken in the face of the misery of the fall, is the essence of humanity, possessed by all men, for "were they divested of their liberty [men] would be reduced to the state of stones and trees"[38].

It is precisely this freedom which inevitably brings with it the possibility of its own abuse, paradoxically: "It is a strange thing that the excess of the hatred of all sin should make sin possible"[39]. It is thus possible that God's greatest and most valuable gift to mankind -

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[38]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p103.

[39]Thomas Traherne, ibid. p102.

the gift of freedom - can and does lead to disaster. If the visionary portrait of life, evoked so successfully by Traherne throughout the "Centuries", is ignored through human folly and laziness, the alternative is a form of hell on earth. Such an abuse of freedom is, in fact, a failure to appreciate the implications of its quality and importance here and now; Traherne is always concerned to stress this immediacy, and personal relevance, of such concepts as Heaven and Hell:

> "To have blessings and to prize them is to be in Heaven; to have them and not to prize them is to be in Hell, I would say upon Earth: To prize them and not to have them, is to be in Hell ... Yea, in some respect it is worse than to be in Hell. It is more vicious, and more irrational". (C1,47).

Between the poles of unsatisfied desire and conscious fulfilment, then, is the state of being which Traherne discerns as being predominant amongst human society, where "blessings" are constantly present but are generally unrecognised. Reality remains unperceived. This state of being it is essential to condemn forcefully - which Traherne does - if the person is to be saved from "Hell", for it amounts to an avoidance of freedom. The separation of mental state from the person is crucial, for the person must always be conceived of as a potential, not simply an actuality, as Traherne clarifies:

> "Yet love can forbear, and love can forgive, though it can never be reconciled to an unlovely object ... What shall become of you therefore since God cannot be reconciled to an ugly object? Verily you are in danger of perishing eternally. He cannot indeed be reconciled to an ugly object as it is ugly, but as it is capable of being otherwise He may. He can never therefore be reconciled to your sin, because sin itself is incapable of being altered, but He may be reconciled to your person, because that may be restored: and, which is an infinite wonder, to greater beauty and splendour than before". (C2,30).

Such a process could be likened to the curing of an illness by a physician, in which the body, potentially healthy, is able to rid itself of whatever prevents it realising the potential.

Clearly, there is a need for tremendous courage to face this crucial choice, for to choose the positive, liberating direction urged by Traherne entails loss as well as gain - loss of habitual attitudes, activities and forms of thought. Early in the first "Century" Traherne states his awareness of loss, although from the viewpoint of the accomplished mystic - the writer's usual persona - the loss seems trivial when compared to the alternative consciousness of

> "an unlimited field of vanity of Beauty: where you may lose yourself in the multitude of Wonders and Delights. But it is an happy loss to lose oneself in admiration of one's own Felicity: and to find God in exchange for oneself". (C1,18).

The central notion of gain through loss - central to all religious philosophy and to Christianity in particular - holds true throughout the "Centuries", but the element of loss is never underestimated. Traherne quotes with joyous recognition the words of Thomas à Kempis, himself following the Christian message delivered in the New Testament by St. Matthew[40]:

> "Give all for all, look for nothing, ask for nothing in return: rest purely and trustingly in Me, and you shall possess Me. Then you shall be free in heart, and no darkness will oppress your soul"[41].

In the "Centuries" Traherne's tone and mode of guidance change to cover the various possible stages and emotions concerned with the transformation, ranging from the arduous struggle to renounce the habits, customs and attachments of a lifetime to the felicitous embrace of a truth and vision infinitely more attractive and satisfying than the competitive, materialistic life left behind. The element of courage is essential and, ultimately, no amount of self deception can avoid the

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[40]Matthew 16.24.

[41]Thomas à Kempis, op cit. p144.

reality of human freedom, "Neither will any pretence serve the turn to cover up our cowardice, which we call modesty ..." (C2,83). The urgency is extreme, and procrastination in the hope of future glory disastrous, for "he that will not exchange his riches now will not forsake them hereafter". (C4,10).

In effect, Traherne wishes, through the positive exercise of free will, "to reconcile men to God"[42] - a reconciliation which would appear to have been attained by Traherne himself but which is nonetheless fraught with difficulties. In a sense, Traherne is interested in the justification of God's ways to man, as a prerequisite of the recovery of lost vision. Such a proposed justification and reconciliation would seem to have been particularly pertinent during Traherne's age, not simply because of the extremity of suffering so recently experienced during the English Civil War and its aftermath, but also, more broadly, because of the gradual but discernible collapse of men's certainty of God's beneficence - a certainty which had been tottering for two centuries or more. The real message of the "Centuries" is concerned with the actual recovery of vision and felicity as experiences, rather than with any abstract or purely intellectual exposition and defence of God's nature and effects. However, the process of recovery must contain within itself an important intellectual element. Man, so far removed from perception of the infinite as to consider such vision as irrational, childish and illusory, must be first convinced in his own terms - the rational and doubting - of the truth of the infinite, before he can perceive it with his whole being as Traherne does. Thus his insistence that he was himself able to break free from his apostasy through a sound grasp of

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[42]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p20.

"Highest Reason", neither scholastic nor merely rational, but rather practical, immediate and liberating. In this context, the words of "The Cloud of Unknowing" are illuminating, concentrating on the divine potential of reason:

> "fundamentally it must always be good, for reason is a godlike thing. But the use we make of it be either good or evil ... In all men and women, religious or secular, normal reason becomes evil when it makes them proud of their worldly attainments; when they covet positions, possessions, pomp and popularity in this present world"[43].

The intellectual element in Traherne's exercise of friendly persuasion is bound up with his philosophy of the "Golden Mean", through which God the infinite manifests Himself in space and time while Himself remaining invisible. Proportion is the key word here: a fundamental proportion inherent in creation itself, giving rise to the aesthetic sense of proportion peculiar to man. Traherne is profoundly aware of the difficulties facing man, in that "they that quarrel at the manner of God's revealing Himself are troubled because he is invisible". (C2,19). He goes on to point out the folly of expecting the infinite to become entirely involved in space and time; indeed, if any one part of creation should become infinite, it would be at the expense of all else. This is true of the sun, Traherne's central symbol:

> "Had the Sun been made one infinite flame, it had been worse than it is, for there had been no living; it had filled all space, and devoured all other things ... Whence we may easily perceive the Divine Wisdom hath achieved things more than infinite in goodness and beauty, as a sure token of their perfect excellency". (C2,11).

God Himself is subject to the same law, if such it is:

> "If God therefore being infinite were visible He would make it impossible for anything to have a being ... Were God therefore pure bulk, He could neither move, nor will, nor desire anything; but being invisible, He leaveth room for and effecteth all things. He filleth nothing with a bodily presence, but includeth all". (C2,19).

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The infinite is, for Traherne, essentially qualitative rather than quantitative, however much the discoveries of contemporary astronomy concerning the external universe thrilled him. Indeed, it is the confusion of the infinite as qualitative, based on human perception, with that of space and time which has led, it appears to me, to the vulgarisation of religious and mystical thought: the imprisonment of man behind new bars as opposed to the total liberation desired by Traherne.

Alongside the expansion of the intellect towards the grasping of revolutionary ideas - for they are indeed revolutionary by implication - man's desire must itself become infinite, freeing itself from the bounds of finite experience. The reader feels that Traherne is somehow at one with his own desire: the desire to create, to exalt, to show, and to stimulate desire in others. He is, in fact, the exponent of his desire, and I see his writing itself as an inextricable part of it. His incisive dialectic grasps the essential nature of desire and its disastrous misuse by man. Essentially, desire presupposes dissatisfaction with one's existing lot, together with the implied, or at least hoped for, possibility of improvement on this state of affairs. Traherne fully supports both elements as the only basis for progress in the adult consciousness, even when discussing the thorny problem of God's original desire to create, with all its possible implication of imperfection prior to the act of creation. In fact, Traherne is able to turn the problem on its head by finding in desire the essence of God's nature, separating Him from the static conception of deities frequently believed in, although the paradox of desire in a Being beyond the flux of time and space is recognised as such:

> "the heathen deities wanted nothing, and were therefore unhappy, for they had no being. But the Lord God of Israel the Living and True God, was from all Eternity, and from all Eternity wanted like a God ... He wanted, yet he wanted not, for He had them". (C1,41).

Man can approach the Divine nature through the quality of his desire: this is a central tenet of the "positive way" of mystical thought, expressed succinctly by the writer of "The Cloud of Unknowing":

> "Your whole life must be one of longing, if you are to achieve perfection. And this longing must be in the depths of your will, put there by God, with your consent"[44].

The basis of success in this quest is to be found in the accurate consciousness of one's own desires and ultimately in the recognition, paradoxically, that all possible desires are already fulfilled. Thus Traherne's meditation on this problem, surely a prime example of applied "Highest Reason":

> "Infinite Wants satisfied produce infinite Joys: and the possession of those joys are infinite joys themselves. The Desire satisfied is a Tree of Life. Desire imports something absent: and a need of what is absent. God was never without this Tree of Life. He did desire infinitely, yet he was never without the fruits of this Tree, which are the joys it produced. I must lead you out of this, into another World, to learn your wants. For till you find them you will never be happy: Wants themselves being Sacred Occasions and Means of Felicity". (C1,43).

Desire without that consciousness of the whole self and sense of direction towards "another world" can be seen as negative: the restless evasion of the present moment of reality which contains within it, given true perception, the infinite, in favour of a projection of fulfilment into the future. This unproductive but widespread facet of desire is criticised by Traherne most strongly in "Christian Ethicks", for indeed the right use of desire is the basis of Traherne's ethical outlook. In the work he discusses what is effectively the dual nature of desire:

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> "Ambition and covetousness [are] virtues when they are means conclusive to the highest end; vices when they distract and entangle us with inferior objects"[45].

The transcendence of such negative desire is an important aspect of mystical thought Traherne shares with many other spiritual seekers, although Traherne goes considerably further than most in vindicating even the basest desire as at least containing energy, if often totally misdirected. Ultimately, the fulfilment of the highest desire is its own negation. Traherne would surely have agreed with Meister Eckhart's succinct and profound statement that "to be full of things is to be empty of God, while to be empty of things is to be full of God", for,

> "Experience must always be an experience of something, but disinterest comes comes so close to zero that nothing but God is rarefied enough to get into it, to enter the disinterested heart"[46].

What appear at first sight to be two opposing attitudes towards desire - the one encouraging, the other dismissive - are in fact identical: the apparent contradictions can, however, only be resolved through entry into "another world" of total self-knowledge. The contradiction cannot be glossed over, for it is too great - in fact any attempt to do this could be dangerously misleading. Neither can it be explained away by holding that all desires are to be encouraged and followed in the hope that they will eventually disappear when satisfied: an equally dangerous position. The essential point to bear in mind, it seems to me, is that for Traherne desire should be neither denied nor indiscriminately encouraged; rather he formulated a synthesis based upon the nature of the object of desire: briefly, when desire is aimed at material things beyond the basic necessities of life it is to be avoided

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[45]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p38.

[46]Meister Eckhart, "About Disinterest", translated by R. B. Blackney, New York, 1941, pp82-83.

as a diversion, but when it seeks the infinite it is to be stimulated and encouraged as the necessary starting point on the road to salvation.

Thus right desire is fundamentally God-like:

> "You must want like a God that you may be satisfied like God. Were you not made in his image? He is infinitely Glorious, because all His wants and supplies are at the same time in His nature from Eternity. He had, and from Eternity He was without all His Treasures. From Eternity He needed them, and from Eternity he enjoyed them. For all Eternity is at once to Him, both the empty durations before the World was made, and the full ones after. His wants are as lively as His enjoyments: and always present with Him". (C1,44).

Self-awareness is the key: "Be sensible of your wants, that you may be sensible of your treasures. He is most like God that is sensible of everything". (C1,45). The theme is reiterated many times during the "Centuries", with subtle variations and in various contexts, most forcefully in the concluding meditations of the second "Century":

> "'Tis man's holiness and glory to desire absolute perfection in God, with a jealousy and care infinitely cruel: for when we so desire it, that without this we should be infinitely displeased, and altogether lost and desperate for ever: finding God to have exceeded all our desires: it becometh the foundation of infinite Love". (C2,83).

Yet Traherne is fully aware that such desire is rarely the case, for when man's vision is limited to the finite, desire becomes mere appetite - the source of the fall from grace which Traherne himself experienced: "I was deceived by my appetite and fell into Sin". (C1,75). The primal desire, it seems, is for enlightenment, and the various appetites which cause so many disastrous problems on earth are perverse substitutes. William Blake echoes Traherne's perception in his formulation of man's relationship with the infinite: "The desire of man being infinite, the possession is infinite and himself infinite"[47].

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[47] William Blake, op cit. p148.

Such a concept of desire is based upon a fundamental vision of man as healthy, innocent and, potentially at least, God-like. The recovery of innocence is central to Traherne's purpose, and it is why the symbol and the reality of the child are of such great importance in his work, in the various respects previously outlined. This project, in fact, constitutes the true nature of man and is of the Divine:

> "The kind of feeling expressed by Traherne that the world of becoming, especially as manifested in microcosmic man, is the necessary, almost the only place in which to discover a Being so totally other as sometimes to seem inaccessible"[48].

Ficino, an extremely important influence on Platonic thought and on Traherne in particular, shares Traherne's insight into the potential nature of man and the striving to realise this nature:

> "the entire effort of our Soul is to become God. This effort is as natural to man as that of flying is to birds. For it is inherent in all men, everywhere and always"[49].

Such insistence on universality is also typical of Traherne's thought: the antithesis of the type of preordained selection espoused by those of the Calvinist creed.

It may well be that the process of writing itself helped Traherne to rediscover his own lost innocence through the recall of powerful memories. D.H. Lawrence's dictum that "we shed our sicknesses in books" is appropriate here, if normal adult consciousness is conceived of as a form of sickness. Certainly the third "Century", frequently autobiographical, is based on the progress from memory to understanding to will, a system used by many mystics, notably

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[48]R. B. Hinman, "The Apotheosis of Faust: Poetry and New Philosophy in the C17", in M. Bradbury and D. Palmer (ed.), "Metaphysical Poetry", London 1970, p166.

[49]Ficino, "Opera Omnia", quoted by R. D. Jordan, "The Temple of Eternity", New York, 1972, p36.

Bonaventure, for whom

> "the universe itself is a ladder by which we can ascend into God ... In order to contemplate the First Principle ... we must pass through his vestiges, which are material, temporal and outside us"[50].

The world itself manifests God's beauty, when rightly seen:

> "When things are ours in their proper places, nothing is needful but prizing to enjoy them. God therefore hath made it infinitely easy to enjoy, by making everything ours, and us able so easily to prize them. Everything is ours that serves us in its place. The Sun serves us as much as is possible, and more than we could imagine. The Clouds and Stars minister unto us, the World surrounds us with beauty, the Air refreshes us, the Sea revives the earth and us. The Earth itself is better than gold because it produceth fruits and flowers". (C1,14).

Again, the similarity between Traherne's thought and that of Bonaventure is striking, in that there is a direct and purposive relationship between the world of the senses and the desires deriving from this world, and the spiritual world. Bonaventure held God to be visible both in and through the sensuous world:

> "this world, which is called the macrocosm, enters our soul, which is called the smaller world, through the doors of the five senses as we perceive, enjoy and judge sensible things"[51].

Both writers, indeed, perceive a creative and mystical parallel between the spiritual and the sensory, which is central to the correct understanding of man's position and to his liberation - of both body and spirit. Ultimately Traherne's total conception of the world is expanded to include creation in its entirety, through his divinely inspired vision which "comprehends the World like the Dust of a Ballance". (C1,19).

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[50]St. Bonaventure, "The Soul's Journey into God", translated and introduced by Ewert Cousins, London, 1978, p60.

[51]St. Bonaventure, ibid. p69.

Traherne's bold, active and confident independence from the accepted notions of sin and guilt through which his ideas on freedom are formulated must have demanded from him considerable intellectual courage and expertise, in the sense of intellect which T.S. Eliot has perceived in John Donne, for whom "a thought was an experience"[52]. In part at least the "Centuries" must have reflected a need for the ordering of thoughts and reflections on experience, as perhaps does all linguistic expression. Meditation, and the written record of meditation in particular, is traditionally used in this way: as a discipline providing an ordered framework and structure for an area of mental activity necessarily impulsive, sporadic and seemingly beyond the normal causal sequence of experience. We can perceive this purpose clearly in the "Centuries", and also in Traherne's earlier work, "Meditations On The Six Days of Creation", written, as Gladys Wade has pointed out in her introduction to the work, "before felicity was attained". The sequence used by Bonaventure, though which the meditator systematically concentrates on the various stages: "Outside through His traces, inside through His image, and above us through His light, which has signed upon our minds the light of Eternal Truth"[53], is again appropriate to Traherne's style, and is given new life by the developing perception of Traherne. The essential purpose of meditation is to

> "Consider, in the Soul of Man, the divine Image, by these three Faculties, Understanding, Will and Memory, which in the Soul are one, having thus an Impress of the Trinity within it"[54].

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[52]T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets", in "Selected Prose of T.S.Eliot", London, 1975, p64. Eliot pursues his argument to the conclusion that a "dissociation of sensibility" occurred subsequent to the seventeenth century.

[53]St. Bonaventure, op cit. p60.

[54]Thomas Traherne, "Meditations", op cit., section 6.

The giving of coherence and pattern to such a complex process, especially in the context of a hostile or indifferent society, must, I think, be an important aspect of the recording of meditation and the profferance of such a record as guidance for other seekers.

Traherne himself is fully aware that intuition alone cannot recover itself, for he observes that it was rather through "Highest Reason" that he was able to rediscover lost innocence on a higher level of understanding than previously possible. As we have seen, Traherne's formulation of "Highest Reason" must be seen in the sense of an all-encompassing perception - that which Cambridge Platonists such as John Smith and Henry More termed the "divine sense". Conventional learning and knowledge have their place but, as Traherne observes in the previously quoted autobiographical sequence of the third "Century", (C3,37), it also has severe limitations. Traherne's account of his own apostasy and his advice to guard against the all too easy corruption of the child's instinctive, intuitive felicity imply the frailty of the child's vision, yet conventional learning does nothing to restore such vision, or to free us from the burden of self-hood - the major obstacle. Traherne realises that until we have come to terms with, and have fully experienced, the folly of the world we remain within its power and at its mercy, and "Highest Reason" is both the method of experiencing man's total position in the world through its careful analysis, and an important part of the ensuing quest to attain a felicity which is beyond any delusion. Briefly, the "Centuries" show a progression towards full knowledge, through the senses to the intellect - in the fullest sense of the "Understanding" - and finally to the soul, characterised by love and by wondrous enjoyment of all creation. In this sense Traherne is indeed a "divine philosopher"[55], and the

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[55]Itrat-Husain, "The Mystical Element in the Metaphysical Poets of the Seventeenth Century", Edinburgh, 1948, p264.

"Centuries" a dynamic synthesis of mystical experience and speculative philosophy, with "personal experience woven in to the fabric of an organic system of philosophy".

Thus we come to the celebratory nature of so much of Traherne's writing; the exuberance of his poetry and prose suggests that one crucial reason why Traherne took pen to paper was simply the overflow of powerful and joyous emotion. As the writer of the "Acts of the Apostles" exclaims, "We cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard" (Acts 4,20). A sense of intense gratitude, expressed in thanksgiving and prayer, pervades the "Centuries", centring around the straightforward wonder felt at pure existence: "It is an inestimable joy that I was raised out of nothing to see and enjoy this glorious world". (C1,92). As I have tried to show, this spontaneous joy and gratitude is given very precise shaping order by Traherne and it may well be that the meditations which comprise the "Centuries" provided for him a valuable link between the inner glory of mystical revelation and the practicalities of being a churchman. Certainly this is one of the traditional functions of organised meditation: a significant part of the inter-relationship between the spirituality felt so strongly and the outer world's demands in following a path of practical righteousness.

In terms of both inner and outer activity - the former as revelation, the latter as example - the reader is struck by the sense of mission in Traherne's writing which I noted earlier. At various stages in the "Centuries", Traherne sees his role as physician to a sick world, from early in the first "Century" when the image is sensitive and comforting, "where love administers physic, its tenderness is expressed in balms and cordials" (C1,14), to the rather more disturbing vision later on in the work:

> "To think the world therefore a general Bedlam, a place of madmen, and oneself a physician, is the most necessary posit of present wisdom; an important imagination and the way to happiness." (C4,20).

Traherne is always a compassionate physician, however, even when facing unpleasant truths, and he realises that forgiveness must always precede healing. He himself, it appears, is able to accomplish this necessary forgiveness through the power of his love, exalted above all else in his writing, which leads eventually to true humility: "I can ... descend into the abyss of humility - there admire a new offspring and torrent of joys - God's Mercies". (C3,48). As Stanley Fish has made abundantly clear in his perceptive work "Self Consuming Artefacts", without actually mentioning Traherne, the metaphor of the "good physician" is an ancient one, stemming from Plato. Fish draws a distinction between rhetorical and dialectical writing:

> "a presentation is rhetorical if it satisfies the needs of its readers ... to mirror and present for approval the opinions its readers already hold"[56],

whereas

> "a dialectical presentation ... is disturbing for it requires of its readers a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by",

and further leads its readers to a point beyond the scope of the rational, discursive and conceptual modes of thought, thus becoming "the vehicle of its own abandonment". Traherne's "Centuries" fit all the requirements for such dialectical healing, not least, it is tempting to suggest, in the blank leaves which follow the final meditation, with the fascinating possibility of Traherne, having brought his reader, or "patient", beyond the point of linguistic expression, handing him over to the divine.

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[56]Stanley E. Fish, "Self-Consuming Artefacts", California U.P., 1972, pp1-3.

So we arrive at what I perceive to be the ultimate aim and inspiration of Traherne's work: to please God in the most appropriate way open to him, in writing. It is, in Traherne's view, the fulfilment of man's spiritual mission which completes God's creation, for

> "By this we may discern what strange power God hath given to us by loving us infinitely. He giveth us a power more to please Him, than if we were able to create worlds and present them unto Him". (C2,60).

## 4. Traherne's Relationship to Human Suffering, Sin and Guilt.

The nature of suffering, sin and guilt is crucial to the process of liberation insisted upon by Traherne. The three human experiences seem to be inseparable: it is even impossible to say which precedes which. Together, however, they constitute what must be the major impediment in the quest for the kind of spiritual ecstasy so joyously recounted by Traherne. The way in which Traherne can be judged as either succeeding or failing to accept and necessarily transcend such central human attributes and experiences inevitably affects the quality of his thought. This is especially so because Traherne's mysticism is not to be viewed as a fixed state of being which once achieved remains unalterably in place, but rather as a flux of constant renewal and movement expressed most aptly by Traherne in symbolic terms of the fountain and stream, constant in form yet ever changing in substance, ever renewing itself:

> "Love in the fountain is love in the stream, and love in the stream equally glorious with love in the fountain. Though it streameth to its object it abideth in the lover, and is the love of the lover". (C2,41).

Traherne's celebration of the child's innocence and the adult's potential felicity has posed for his readers the essential problem I have touched upon several times already: how does Traherne's mystical outlook on life take into account the very obvious suffering, sin and guilt present throughout this earthly existence? It is pertinent at this point, perhaps, to examine the views of various twentieth century critics concerning Traherne's work, with particular reference to his success or failure in this context. Such an examination should serve at least to put the problem into critical perspective and may provide us with clues helping to solve the enigma of mystical consciousness.

To view the development of criticism of Traherne chronologically is to notice immediately many discrepancies and contrasts in the critical evaluation of his work. Bertram Dobell, Traherne's discoverer and first critic, perhaps understandably, reacts with admiration and wonder at his discovery, yet his notable contemporary, the scholar of mystical thought and its expression Evelyn Underhill, is very far from enthusiastic. For Underhill, it is the apparent absence both of the expression of suffering and recognition of sin which marks Traherne as less than a true mystic. He refers to the "sugary platonics of Traherne", and, in reference to both Traherne and Henry Vaughan, writes that "here we find much spiritual charm, but little evidence of first hand struggle and experience"[57]. Further, Underhill makes it clear that for him it is these limitations which suggest that Traherne's thought is irrelevant to the demands of the modern age, writing in a letter that "Traherne is no use to me somehow: too meditative and not sufficiently contemplative". This is strong criticism indeed, from a writer still regarded some seventy years later as a foremost authority on mysticism, and it would appear to relegate Traherne to the status of a writer of insignificant, if charming, religious prose and verse. Some years later in 1944, however, Traherne's chief biographer Gladys Wade celebrates Traherne as "a mystic of the first order"[58], thus redressing the balance somewhat, although Wade had no claim to be an expert on mysticism. Subsequent criticism has tended to follow either of the directions outlined, with significant elaborations and variations. It is interesting to note for our present purpose that the whole question of suffering and sin, whether of Traherne himself as a personality

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[57]Evelyn Underhill, "The Mystics of the Church", London, 1925, p221.

[58]Gladys Wade, "Thomas Traherne: A Critical Biography", Princeton, 1944, p86.

emerging from his writing or as a general, objective reality with which Traherne must come to terms, is often central to the critical evaluation of his work.

Itrat-Husain, for example, writes that for him "it is evident that Traherne has no acute consciousness of sin"[59]. The basis for such a view is the apparent absence of lengthy analysis of such matters by Traherne, who indeed does, it seems to me, share the advice found in "The Cloud of Unknowing" to " ... look more to God's worthiness than to your own worthlessness. To the perfectly humble there is nothing lacking, spiritual or physical". The clear implication of Itrat-Husain's work on Traherne is that the true mystic should have greatly suffered and have expressed this suffering - the view, in fact, of Underhill - for "the two aspects of purification of the self - self-stripping and mortification -are not to be found in the life of Traherne". This certainly seems a rather tenuous statement in the light of the absence of anything but very basic biographical detail concerning Traherne, and also presupposes a fixed pattern of mystic experience. As Itrat-Husain develops his criticism, he begins to see Traherne as adopting an essentially blinkered view of the world, intellectual rather than experimental, a "Divine Philosopher" but in limited terms, who "sees order, beauty and love everywhere in God's creation, but does not try to solve the problem of evil and sin in this world ... he does not show the need to self purification or mortification to subdue sin." Apparently lacking sufficient power, Traherne's thought appears a rather shallow type of idealism: purely conceptual and uninspiring.

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[59]Itrat-Husain, op cit. pp292-293.

Further, Traherne is criticised for failing to be self-critical in terms of judgement of his own thoughts, experiences and their expression. In the end, the limitations mean that Traherne's belief is in "the communion with God, not in a direct vision of Him in illumination". A decade later R. W. Hepburn, in his analysis of the development of Christian theology in poetry and its relevance to the modern age[60], echoes this view of Traherne as strictly limited, even to the point of delusion, seeing him as precursor of Wordsworth: both idealists lacking either moral or spiritual profundity, "mistaking vastness for totality".

However, other critics view Traherne's seeming failure to recognise the power of sin in a more complimentary light. Hilda Vaughan, in her introduction to the 1960 edition of the "Centuries", writes that

> "his sense of sin is almost wholly negative, that is, in the way in which St. Augustine regarded Evil, as being nothing in itself but the mere foul parasite of good".

She goes on to posit a totally Christian answer to the criticisms levelled at Traherne I outlined above:

> "Can he, perhaps, before birth, have so high an understanding of Absolute Good as All That Is, that it was unnecessary for him to experience, here on earth, the appalled, ghastly contemplation of its opposite, which most pilgrims who leave the plain path of piety and ethics have to endure at one stage or another along the Mystic's Way?"

The question posed here is indeed pertinent, if perhaps unlikely to appeal to mainstream secular criticism. In their emphasis on the positive rather than negative aspects of mysticism, found abundantly throughout Traherne's work, Marjorie Hope Nicolson and Harold Fisch are similar. Nicolson's study[61] concentrates on Traherne's celebration

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[60]R. W. Hepburn, "Poetry and Religious Belief", in "Metaphysical Beliefs", London, 1957, p154.

[61]M. Hope Nicolson, op cit.

of the infinite, with the unmistakable implication that such a vision is beyond the questioning of morality, and for Fisch[62] Traherne stands squarely in the Hebraic tradition of mystical thought: characterised as the joyous expression of the free spirit, in contrast to the puritan stress on sin and guilt. A. L. Clements also has developed comparable views[63], affirming that for Traherne sin and guilt could be transcended by closeness to the spiritual source of life which should be continually striven for; thus, "the de-emphasis on evil in his work stems from a deliberate choice of strategy, not from ignorance or easy optimism". Neither, according to Clements, does Traherne's idealism extend to that espoused by Pelagius and the subsequent adherents of the Pelagian heresy, for he realises that the fallen self-hood - the psyche - cannot alone regenerate itself and requires the positive intervention of Christ, through grace, to overcome and redeem the "psychic" man, going well beyond the human tendency towards evil and destruction, and on to a total union and liberation of the soul. For R. B. Hinman in his essay[64] on the Faustian quality of Traherne's insight, Traherne becomes indeed a "contemporary imitation of Christ, destroying deadly sins by transmuting each into its opposite, into full operative charity" - a creative leap well beyond the bounds of sin.

Alison Sherrington, concentrating principally on Traherne's poetry, recognises Traherne's crucial de-emphasis on sin[65], for

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[62]H Fisch, op cit.

[63]A. L. Clements, op cit. p30.

[64]R. B. Hinman, op cit. p152

[65]A. J. Sherrington, "Mystical Symbolism in the Poetry of Thomas Traherne", Queensland, 1970, p41.

> "he places his emphasis not on the power of sin or on the limitations of earthly existence but on the miraculous power of the spirit to shine unhindered through the flimsy veil of flesh".

Man is thus exalted "to the point of heresy", yet ultimately, according to Sherrington, Traherne's mysticism is limited because of his insistence on self-hood:

> "he does not seem to have experienced 'union' with God in the way that some other Christian mystics have, for, paradoxically the closer he comes to God, the more aware he is of his own importance and of the divine favours bestowed on him. There is perhaps 'communion' rather than 'union' with the Infinite One, since the self is never dead".

This criticism is centred on a crucial point, raising the problem of an apparent solipsism in Traherne's outlook. K.W. Salter links this supposed clinging to the self more closely to the problem of sin in Traherne's work[66], writing that "it is not possible to say that he knew anything of the difficulties of purgation or the desolation of the dark night of the soul", for Traherne is concerned more with "self-amendment" than with "real purification". Consequently, "Evil for Traherne is not real; it is the result of an imperfect realisation of the world and of the nature of man", although in precisely what sense this definition makes evil "not real" is not made entirely clear. Surely psychic reality is exactly what we are dealing with here? According to this view, the figure of Christ is considerably devalued and becomes almost superfluous, and Traherne himself "cannot be put with the great mystics".

This supposed devaluation of Christ as redeemer is mentioned also by Francis King[67] who writes with a touch of irony of Traherne:

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[66]K. W. Salter, "Thomas Traherne - Mystic and Poet", London, 1964, p46.

[67]F. King, op cit. p141.

> "for one at home in felicity, sin is only a blurring of the eye ... only a parenthesis ... no essential part of the meaning of earthly life".

Redemption, as a result, loses much of its central Christian importance, and Christ Himself "carries little emotional weight". King, in fact, perceives in Traherne a "confusion of ideas" - the essential characteristic of his philosophy despite the acknowledged "unusually powerful" childhood vision. Sharon Cadman Seelig[68], similarly, interprets Traherne's view of sin as "primarily an illusion, a failure to see God's truth". Although she shows a greater sense of the positive nature of Traherne's thought than does King there is no real attempt to explore the nature of this illusion and the extent to which it may become a psychic reality. J. B. Leishman is more directly critical[69], asserting that "Traherne never really faces the problem of evil". Leishman surmises that Traherne's is a blinkered vision, tainted by his avoidance of the problem, derived from a failure to move beyond the relative comforts of his own life: "He has little sense of sin, and his life, though simple, seems to have been sheltered and congenial".

Patrick Grant has, as we have already noted, put Traherne's views on sin into the cultural context of his time[70], perceiving in the writing a deliberate and conscious attempt to counter the predominant contemporary philosophy based as it was on an obsession with sin and guilt, and other critics have developed similar views. Notable amongst

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[68]Sharon Cadman Seelig, "The Shadows of Eternity", U. of Kentucky, 1981, p97.

[69]J. B. Leishman, "The Metaphysical Poets", Oxford, 1934, p197.

[70]P. Grant, op cit.

these are Stanley Stewart, Richard Jordan and Barbara Lewalski[71], without adding significantly to this particular aspect of Traherne scholarship. Perhaps the most perceptive of recent critics in this context is Anthony Low, who has commented[72], "the charge that Traherne did not believe in original sin or evil does not survive close reading... evil is real, purity of vision more real still". Further, "he knows evils exist but values the perception that passes over them or converts them into good", for, more so even than the arch critic of prescriptive morality William Blake, Traherne "prefers to forget, except in passing, what he regards as false paths taken, the better to begin again", thus developing a form of Christianity both experimental and experiential.

Possible conclusions from this brief analysis of critical thought concerning Traherne's views on suffering, sin and guilt must remain limited. It would seem, however, that as scholarship on Traherne has developed over the years, so has a deeper and clearer understanding of Traherne's insistence on the transcendence of sin possible for mankind. It may be possible also to maintain that, generally, the more detailed and exhaustive the study on Traherne the less likely he is to be dismissed as a blinkered, shallow, escapist or merely charming writer. Yet there remain well considered and pertinent criticisms of Traherne's world view, and it is now necessary to examine Traherne's work more closely, in the light of such criticism. In so doing I hope also to expand upon what I consider to be the dual nature of Traherne's sense of liberation: both negative in the sense of a

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[71]S. Stewart, R. Jordan, B. Lewalski, all op cit.

[72]Anthony Low, op cit. p265.

liberation from some form of constraint, and positive as a liberation containing in itself the possibilities projected forward into infinite life.

To the modern reader, accustomed to a view of the world either profoundly pessimistic, or secular, or both, Traherne's message may well frequently have an unfamiliar and possibly inappropriate tone and meaning. I refer here particularly to the over-riding impression left by even a cursory reading of Traherne: the sense of joyous gratitude for the precious gift of life and each of its infinite possibilities. It would appear to be self-evident that this is not the predominant perception of life found in western culture in the latter half of the Twentieth Century, and I feel it essential to take careful account of the shift in vantage point over the past three centuries if we are to fully understand the meaning of Traherne's writing, specifically in relation to the problems of suffering, sin and guilt. Two possible changes could account for this shift in outlook and thus for the frequent unfamiliarity of Traherne's message: either the ethical nature of the world has changed significantly in a way which has made it palpably more sinful, painful and guilt-ridden than the world inhabited by Traherne, or man's perceptions of life and the world have changed to the extent that Traherne's visions would now be impossible or unlikely. The former possibility we can dismiss fairly easily: Traherne, indeed, lived through what by all accounts must have contained some of the sharpest of human sufferings - the Civil War and its aftermath. We have already noted that Traherne, furthermore, derived much of his creative impetus through reaction against a society preoccupied with guilt. Thus if it was possible in Seventeenth Century England to believe what Traherne believed, then it should be possible today. Suffering clearly exists to that organism which suffers, and its mathematical increase or decrease

makes little difference to this fundamental truth. So we are left with the second possibility - that man himself has changed, in that he is today either incapable of achieving or unwilling to achieve Traherne's type of experience. It may well be that modern man, beset by doubts about every traditionally held belief, is incapable of accepting the intellectual framework within which Traherne operated, and through which he was able to develop his experience. This is not to claim that Traherne's own time's intellectual framework was entirely secure - far from it, in fact, as we have already seen - yet it seems to me that certain beliefs concerning the existence of God and His salvation of mankind had not in the latter half of the seventeenth century yet been sufficiently eroded to make Traherne's views entirely idiosyncratic.

It is, of course, possible to argue that such considerations are irrelevant to any judgement of Traherne's contribution to thought and literature - that it is somehow wrong to criticise a writer three centuries after his life, using as a basis of that criticism a modern set of values. However I feel that such criticism is justifiable and indeed necessary, provided that the complex relationship of a writer to his contemporary social and cultural conditions is properly understood. We must, I think, consider it a weakness of the writer if his literary output is relevant only to his particular epoch, however interesting or beautifully stated his words might be, and an even greater weakness if subsequent to his epoch some truth is discovered which invalidates his essential message. This is not to claim that every word is to be taken as absolutely true and relevant: an artist of whom this is true would be a rarity indeed. Many of Isaac Newton's ideas on astrology have been largely discredited, yet his scientific insight remains intact: many of William Blake's assertions concerning the craft of copper-plate

engraving are now seen to be demonstrably false, yet his essential philosophy can still be regarded as arguably valid. It is really a matter of distinguishing carefully between what is central to a writer's message and what is peripheral. If, as has been claimed by Underhill particularly, Traherne's philosophy is somehow irrelevant to our present needs, we must indeed accept him as an interesting curiosity and little more.

With this in mind, I have selected as a standard against which to measure and judge Traherne's Christian beliefs and their expression a succinct modern critique of the Christian position with which C. S. Lewis introduced his book "The Problem of Pain" before going on to give his own Christian answer to the critique - an answer which may itself help to illuminate further Traherne's philosophy. The critique is meant to summarise the typical Twentieth Century secular outlook and deserves extensive quotation:

> "Look at the Universe we live in. By far the greatest part of it consists of empty space, completely dark and unimaginably cold ... Earth herself existed without life for millions of years and may exist for millions more when life has left her. And what is it like while it lasts? It is so arranged that all the forms of it can live only by preying upon one another. In the lower forms this process entails only death, but in the higher there appears a new quality called consciousness which enables it to be attended by pain ... In the most complex of all the creatures, Man, yet another quality appears, which we call reason, whereby he is enabled to foresee his own pain which henceforth is preceded with acute mental suffering, and to foresee his own death while keenly desiring permanence. It also enables Man by a hundred ingenious contrivances to inflict a great deal more pain than they otherwise could have done on one another and on the irrational creatures. This power they have exploited to the full ... Every race that comes into being in any part of the universe is doomed; for the universe, they tell us, is running down, and will sometime be a uniform infinity of homogeneous matter at a low temperature. All stories will come to nothing: all life will turn out in the end to have been a transitory and senseless contortion upon the idiotic face of infinite matter ... "

> Either there is no spirit behind the universe, or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit"[73].

This is powerful condemnation indeed of the Christian vantage point, and I am not sure that Lewis himself answers it satisfactorily. A detailed examination of Traherne's own views concerning such matters must now be undertaken before any evaluation of his position can be made.

It seems to me that the crux of the matter rests with Traherne's assertion early in the first "Century" concerning the perfection of creation, which contrasts directly with the critique outlined above:

> "For when you are once acquainted with the world you will find the goodness and wisdom of God so manifest therein, that it was impossible that another, or a better should be made. Which being made to be enjoyed, nothing can please or serve them more, than the Soul that enjoys it. For that Soul doth accomplish the end of His desire in Creating it". (C1,10).

Later in the same "Century" this perception of creation is developed further:

> "You never enjoy the World aright till you see all things in it so perfectly yours, that you cannot desire them any other way: and till you are convinced that all things serve you best in their proper places. For can you desire to enjoy anything a better way than in God's image? It is the height of God's perfection that hideth his bounty. And the lowness of your base and sneaking Spirit, that make you ignorant of His perfection ... God's bounty is so perfect that He giveth all Things in the best of manners ..." (C1,38).

Elsewhere, Traherne concentrates less on the nature of relationship between man and the rest of creation, more on the subjective emotions experienced by man, but with the same essential message of attainable perfection, for "The very greatness of our felicity convinceth us that there is a God" (C2,21). Man's position seems to be exalted, in the midst of the perfection of creation:

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[73]C. S. Lewis, "The Problem of Pain", Collins, London, 1957, pp1-2.

> "How great does God appear in wisely preparing such an understanding to enjoy His creatures: Such an endless, invisible, and mysterious receiver! And how blessed and divine are you, to whom God hath not only simply appeared, but whom He hath exalted as an Immortal King among all His Creatures". (C2,24).

It certainly appears, on the surface at least, that such statements suggest that we are all living in the best of all possible worlds and that nobody has any cause for complaint: all very well if, as has been suggested by certain critics above, Traherne lived a comfortable and sheltered life of letters, but rather less appropriate if one lives a life full of hardship and suffering, either in the England of the seventeenth century or today. It is indeed a thorny problem, and may well have given rise to the more critical of modern scholarly writing on Traherne, containing as it frequently does the suggestion that his vision is somehow blinkered, if not totally delusory, and thus crucially limited.

However, careful reflection, taking into account the entire context of Traherne's work, may provide alternative and perhaps fuller interpretations. At base, I feel that Traherne's thoughts and feelings, including those mentioned in the statements at issue here, are about human consciousness in its dynamic relationship to the world, and not about the world as separate from man, or about the nature of the material universe generally. Traherne himself seems to be aware of the danger of misinterpretation on this score, for he explains early in the "Centuries" the distinction between the various types of "world":

> "To contemn the world and to enjoy the world are things contrary to each other. How then can we contemn the world, which we are born to enjoy? Truly there are two worlds. One was made by God, the other by men. That made by God was great and beautiful. Before the Fall it was Adam's joy and the Temple of His Glory. That made by men is a Babel of confusions: Invented Riches, Pomps and Vanities, brought in by Sin. Give all (saith Thomas a Kempis) for all. Leave the one that you may enjoy the other". (C1,7).

It is clear throughout the "Centuries" that Traherne rejoiced in the beauty of creation; not for him the deliberate turning of the back to the world characteristic of so much religious thought, even as found in "The Cloud of Unknowing", whose writer advises,

> "Try to forget all created things that He ever made, and the purpose behind them, so that your thought and longing do not turn, or reach out to them either in general or particular".

The insight found later in "The Cloud" is, however, appropriate to Traherne - stressing the symbolic importance of all human vision:

> "All the visions that men see here in human shape have spiritual meanings... Therefore let us strip off the husk, and eat the sweet kernel"[74].

It is worth noting here that the elevated "world" so admired by Traherne is attainable here and now, and is not to be relegated either to a historic golden age before the Fall or to any age of future glory; Traherne's use of the Fall, indeed, here and elsewhere, is essentially symbolic and mythological. He in fact considers that God's creation requires fulfilment to realise its own ultimate perfection, and the starting point must be man's own consciousness of the wonder of existence; only as a development of this sense of wonder can alienation between consciousness and world be healed - truly a liberating process. Thus the onus is clearly on man to realise perfect felicity, and in so doing a great part of the obvious suffering of the world may well recede - although it must be said that a great part will also remain. To summarise: God needs man to bring creation to perfection. Indeed,

> "Traherne sometimes suggests that the cause and purpose of the creation was to satisfy a want, and, therefore, to remove an imperfection in the nature of God Himself"[75].

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[74]"The Cloud of Unknowing", op cit. p131.

[75]J. B. Leishman, op cit. p195.

Further, for all Traherne's celebration of the delights of this world, it is unlikely that his religious belief and perception could be deduced from physical reality and physical events, however close a study could be made of such phenomena; rather, such a state of consciousness must by its very nature stem from a primary experience of the numiness although this must include the material world within its perspective.

This is not to suggest that for Traherne sin, or suffering and guilt, do not exist or are of little concern. The ethical aspect of Traherne's thought is of great significance, not only in "Christian Ethicks", as could be expected, but in the "Centuries" and the poems also. It is interesting, however, that his ethical thoughts are rarely prescriptive, but are rather based upon the need for a profound enjoyment of life and the enlargement of the possibilities open to man as a free agent. The moral analysis of life is an essential stage of the road, through meditation, to felicity; this explains why the tone of "Christian Ethicks" can be likened more to a handbook on meditation than a guide to correct human behaviour. In this Traherne stands within the tradition of meditative writing, for

> "the meditation writer develops a habit of extending through symbolism and moral commentary the imaginative reference of the matter in hand. There is a progression from observed and related phenomena ... through moral analysis to a direct act of faith and devotion"[76].

The morality, then, is purposive, forward looking - never dwelling on the misery of its absence or negation, always realistically dealing with what is possible for mankind. As Traherne explains in the "Address to the Reader" preface to "Christian Ethicks",

> "I do not much speak of Vice which is a far more easie theme, because I am entirely taken up with the abundance of Worth and Beauty in Virtue",

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[76]H. Fisch, op cit. p50.

and, later in the volume,

> "The abundance of matter which virtue itself doth afford forbids us to waste our time and paper in the description of their contraries".

Sin itself Traherne describes in his poem "Adam's Fall" as "... a Deviation from the way of God", and it is precisely this deviation which has given birth to morality as a necessary corrective. It is typical of Traherne that when he compares the beauty of virtue to the ugliness of vice, it is in sensuous terms, for the former "will make all vice appear like dirt before a jewel when they are compared together"[77]. Sin may be real, but it has for the ecstatic Traherne no real attraction, even in its denunciation. When life is difficult in its inevitable phases of suffering and misery, it is virtue which becomes "desirable and glorious, because it teacheth us through many difficulties in this tempestuous world to sail smoothly and attain the haven"[78].

Some virtues are indeed directly inspired by the Fall - virtues such as patience and hope - but for Traherne these are secondary virtues. Yet underlying even these are the "primitive" virtues of joy,

> "the face of religion beneath that mask or vizor of ordinances and new duties which sin and corruption has put upon it ... it is a great error to mistake the vizor for the face"[79].

In a detailed analysis of the progressive states of human consciousness developing towards felicity in the third "Century" - summarised as the mental states of "innocency, misery, grace and glory" (C3,43) - sin is explained as the product of the fall, alongside the suffering of the earthly life:

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[77]T. Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p18.

[78]T. Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", ibid. p26.

[79]T. Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", ibid. p43.

> "In the state of innocency we are to contemplate the nature and manner of his happiness, the laws under which he was governed, the joys of paradise and the immaculate powers of his immortal soul. In the estate of misery, we have his fall, the nature of Sin, original and actual; his manifold punishments, calamity, sickness, death etc. In the estate of grace: the tenour of the new covenant, the manner of its exhibition under the various dispensations of the Old and New Testament, the Mediator of the covenant, the conditions of it, faith and repentance, the sacraments or seals of it, the Scriptures, ministers and sabbaths, the nature and government of the Church, its histories and successions from the beginning to the end of the world etc." (C3,43).

The morality stressed during the state of grace, then, is generally corrective, and it is not until the ultimate state of Glory that felicity can be realised in its purity - this state being available to each and every person, awakening

> "To all which I was naturally born, to the fruition of all which I was by Grace redeemed, and in the enjoyment of which I am to live eternally". (C3,43).

We can see here quite clearly that far from ignoring the unpleasant aspects of life, Traherne is acutely aware of their importance and is thoroughly acquainted with the nature of each as a necessary prerequisite of repentance and transcendence, for "the tears of a sinner are a reviving spirit to the soul"[80].

We have already examined Traherne's own fall from childhood innocence, explained by him in terms primarily cultural and social, albeit derived from the original propensity of man to lose such innocence and become self-centred. It is important to stress the extent and depth of misery arising from such a fall, and again we see the strength of Traherne's language confounding those critics who maintain that Traherne could have had no real experience of despair:

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[80]T. Traherne, "Meditations", op cit., section 2.

"Whatever els thou now dost see
In Custom, Action or Desire,
'Tis but a Part of Miserie
In which all men on earth conspire"[81].

Christopher Hill's analysis of the progressive and revolutionary social ideals of the English Revolution and its aftermath[82] enables us to place Traherne's own views in a broad social context. A picture emerges of a society in flux. Many people, from different walks of life and for vastly different purposes, were concerned with replacing outmoded and inadequate notions of repression, sin and guilt with a view of life far more libertarian - socially, spiritually and politically - and apparently based far more directly on actual human experience. In particular, age-old traditions which held the social order and its attendant property relationships to be ordained by God and therefore somehow eternal, began to be questioned and discarded by often deeply religious minds. In his ideas at least, for we know all too little of his activity, Traherne seems to have been a radical critic of a social order deeply materialistic, competitive and acquisitive - a social order which for all these characteristics had always sought to use religious orthodoxy as its justification. Traherne's assertion, for example, that it is "the love of money which is the root of all evil", (C2,98), is unequivocal in its apportion of the blame for sin on a grasping materialism, and it is interesting to note that the subject of the sentence is the abstract human quality; the "love" rather than love's object in the material world - "money" in this example - which for Traherne must always be neutral. Unfortunately for them, as Traherne frequently points out with reference to himself and others, it seems

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[81]Thomas Traherne, "The Instruction", p14, l.13-16.

[82]Particularly in "The World Turned Upside Down", London, 1975.

that most people have an inherent tendency to conform to the social norm they find themselves surrounded by, and Traherne is aware of the ironic nature of this seemingly sociable inclination:

> "'Tis strange that an excess of goodness should be the fountain of all evil. An ambition to please, a desire to gratify, a great desire to delight others being the greatest snare in the world. Hence it is that all hypocrisies and honours arise, I mean esteem of honours. Hence all imitations of human customs, hence all compliances and submissions to the vanities and errors of this world. For men being mistaken in the nature of Felicity, and we by a strong inclination prone to please them, follow a multitude to do evil ... And the more there are that delight in us the more great and happy we account ourselves" (C4,44).

Here, assuredly, is no easy optimism or delusion concerning human beings; the implication is that liberation can be achieved only through individual courage and strength - a strength robust enough to face this perhaps most unpalatable of perceptions. Traherne's intellectual honesty, his willingness to face the world as it really is, is nowhere more apparent.

Traherne clearly realises that persuasion alone can never change men's hearts, and certainly compulsion cannot - indeed compulsion by its nature would only serve to pervert the process of liberation from sin and suffering, for "all goodness is spoiled by compulsion"[83]. An alternative to either persuasion or compulsion could be to remove the object of temptation or the evidence of others having succumbed to temptation. Failing this complete removal, to forbid men to turn their eyes towards temptations may suffice. However, with considerable psychological insight, Traherne realises the folly of any of these strategies, for

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[83]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p40.

> "the concealment of an object whets our appetite ... we are led by instinct to eagerly thirst after things unknown, remote and forbidden"[84].

Traherne's Christianity, like that of Christ Himself is experiential: the experience of true felicity renders sin impossible, for "were there no blindness, every soul would be full of light, and the face of felicity be seen, and the earth turned into heaven"[85]. In comparison to this formulation, all else would seem doomed to failure. Felicity puts everything into perspective, including the suffering of the world. Indeed, without this perspective nothing can be evaluated:

> "Till you see that the World is yours, you cannot weigh the greatness of sin, nor the misery of your fall, nor prize your Redeemer's love. One would think that there should be motives sufficient to stir us up to the contemplation of God's works, wherein all the riches of His Kingdom will appear. For the greatness of sin proceedeth from the greatness of His love whom we have offended, from the greatness of those obligations which were laid upon us, from the great blessedness and glory of the estate wherein we were placed, none of which can be seen, till Truth is seen, a great part of which is, that the World is ours. So that indeed the knowledge of this is the very real light, wherein all mysteries are evidenced to us". (C2,3).

Ultimately, "no man can sin that clearly seeth the beauty of God's face". (C2,97). Such a perception of the relationship between felicity and suffering is crucial to Traherne's philosophy and, I feel, makes it abundantly clear that his starting point is always reality in its entirety - warts and all.

Thus we can perceive the real strength of Traherne's position. His fundamental vision of the world, inspired by Christ, makes sinful thought or action the result of ignorance, of less than total perception. Not too much knowledge, but too little insight is the case. For Traherne sin can become impossible, not when one's moral

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[84]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", ibid. p24.

[85]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", ibid. p18.

strength and sense are so powerful as to make repression of sinful ideas and inclinations relatively easy, but rather when the opposite occurs: when repression becomes totally unnecessary because the duality of right and wrong has been transcended by love. In Saint Augustine's terse advice to "love, then do as you will" lies the essence of Traherne's ethical conception of the World, given detailed exposition in "Christian Ethicks". The corollary to this central Christian philosophy is clearly universal forgiveness. The vulgarisation of Christian ethical values, by placing the emphasis on moral repression and stricture rather than liberation and love, had led in Traherne's day - and continues to lead - to the self-righteous and self-justifying condemnation of those deemed sinful without any real attempt to understand the depth of ignorance from which base actions - and often their condemnation also - stem. Traherne is concerned to return to an emotional formulation of the Christian message, based on real experience of mystical insight. Again, we find the "Cloud of Unknowing" shares the insight: "to know it for oneself is endless bliss; its contrary is endless pain"[86]. At times, Traherne's formulation of his discovery is devastatingly simple:

> "What have men to do in this world but to make themselves happy? ... Verily, happiness being the sovereign and supreme of our concerns, should have the most peculiar portion of our time, and other things what she can spare". (C4,7).

Later in the same meditation, however, Traherne realises with sadness that "it is a strange thing that men will be such enemies to themselves".

For Traherne knowledge is total experience; an immersion of the self into this experience. With this in mind we can see the aptness of a statement probably meant to criticise Traherne for undervaluing the

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[86]"The Cloud of Unknowing", op cit. p63.

importance of sin - especially when we remember other criticisms of Traherne by Leishman quoted earlier - "We might almost say that virtue is knowledge and vice ignorance"[87]. It is possible that there is a failure here to understand the nature of Traherne's conception of Knowledge, and conversely, of his perception into human ignorance. The writings of the German mystic Meister Eckhart, probably an important influence on Traherne and certainly expressing ideas often akin to his, may serve to illuminate Traherne's own view. In the appropriately titled "Book of Divine Comfort", Eckhart writes, "surely suffering is due to our failure to aim at him (God) and him alone: for if you are reborn and clothed in justice, then truly nothing could hurt you any more than God's own justice would"[88]. Later in the same treatise Eckhart explains what for him is the cause of suffering, "due simply to our human way of living on the outside of things, far away from God". Eckhart, it seems to me, is referring to the lack of total experience, criticism of which is so vital to Traherne's mysticism. It is now clearer, I hope, why Traherne feels so strongly that the worst sins are pride and ingratitude, for both serve to separate man from reality, experiencer from experience. When dealing with such human characteristics Traherne's prose becomes forceful and vehement:

> "the nature of man is such that it is odious and ungrateful. For those things which are most glorious when most naked, are by men when most nakedly revealed, most despised". (C4,13).

To compensate for this lack of vision, man seeks to amplify his own self-esteem, thus giving birth to Traherne's most hated vice, pride. Briefly, pride is explained as the ultimate in falsehood, and is indeed

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[87]J. B. Leishman, op cit. p197.

[88]Meister Eckhart, "The Book of Divine Comfort", op cit. p45.

"to act a lie"[89]. Conversely, true humility "makes men capable of all felicity"[90], or, as written in "The Cloud of Unknowing",

> "In itself humility is nothing else but a true knowledge and awareness of oneself as one really is. For surely whoever truly saw and felt himself as he is, would truly be humble"[91].

The full import of human ingratitude is that life becomes devoid of meaning, since

> "God doth desire love from us because His wisdom very well knows that without love the world would be in vain, and the end of creation frustrated"[92].

Now we can see just how appropriate is Stanley Fish's exposition of dialectical writing to Traherne's position[93], in that Traherne seeks to shake off the lethargy of concern for social acceptance, reinforced as it so often is by rhetorical writing and speech. In order to understand fully the nature of Traherne's dialectic, we must carefully distinguish, as he does, between the limited, selfish "self" and the infinite, felicitous "self" able to comprehend creation. Herein lies the key to the understanding of Traherne's most important and, at first sight, bewildering of paradoxes: to "enjoy" yet "contemn" the world; to elevate the individual self beyond all else yet to desire its annihilation. We must distinguish, as does Clements[94], between the worldly "psyche", bound by memories and essentially negative, and the "pneuma", which is characterised as creatively imaginative, with direct

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[89]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p226.

[90]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", ibid. p231.

[91]"The Cloud of Unknowing", op cit. p78.

[92]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p66.

[93]S. Fish, op cit.

[94]A. L. Clements, op cit.

reference to Traherne's position. Eventual regeneration can be achieved only through the destruction of the ego-based psyche - or rather, perhaps, its transcendence - whereby man's Divine image may be restored. In the important series of meditations commencing with the fifty-third meditation of the fourth "Century" and culminating in the seventieth, Traherne analyses the nature of love and its relationship to both "psyche" and "pneuma", and particularly the transformation from the one to the other. It is interesting that self-love is not decried; rather it is elevated in importance beyond the position traditionally allotted to it by most Christian moralists. However it is important to appreciate the dynamic thrust of Traherne's thought: self-love can only become a liberating force if, again paradoxically, it can progress beyond itself to point away from the self. Thus the limited self is able to transcend its own boundaries and limitations, through the discovery that it is these restrictions which impede further growth and cause frustration.

Clearly, this discovery requires a considerable measure of self-appraisal and the positive operation of "Highest Reason" if it is to be followed up by practice. It is appropriate that when writing of such a process with regard to himself Traherne writes in the third person, thus objectifying all it entails through the adoption of a persona of the detached and critical self-observer:

> "He was a strict and severe applier of all things to himself, and would first have his self-love satisfied, and then his love of all others. It is true that self-love is dishonourable, but then it is when it is alone. And self-endedness is mercenary, but then it is when it endeth in oneself. It is more glorious to love others, and more desirable, but by natural means to be attained. That pool must first be filled that shall be made to overflow. He was ten years studying before he could satisfy his self-love. And now finds nothing more easy than to love others better than oneself: and that to love mankind so is the comprehensive method to all Felicity ... So that God by satisfying my self-love, hath enabled and engaged me to love others". (C4,55).

The imagery of water flowing and over-flowing reinforces the central idea of barriers becoming redundant, outliving their usefulness and finally being burst. The following meditation seeks to develop the idea, in the style almost of Biblical parable:

> "No man loves, but he loves another more than himself ... A mother runs upon a sword to save her beloved. A father leaps into the fire to fetch out his beloved. Love brought Christ from Heaven to die for His beloved. It is in the nature of love to despise itself, and to think only of its beloved's welfare". (C4,56).

Traherne realises that the ultimate disappearance of the ego would be all but impossible on this earth and must await the final phase of spiritual development - the state of glory - yet there is a great deal that can be achieved here and now:

> "Here upon Earth, it is under many disadvantages and impediments that maim it in its exercise, but in Heaven it is most glorious. And it is my happiness that I can see it on both sides the veil or screen. There it appeareth in all its advantages, for every soul being full and fully satisfied, at ease, in rest, and wanting nothing, easily overflows and shines upon all. It is its perfect interest so to do, and nothing hinders it, self-love there being swallowed up and made perfect in the love of others. But here it is pinched and straitened by wants: here it is awakened and put in mind of itself: here it is divided and distracted between two. It has a body to provide for, necessities to relieve, and a person to supply. Therefore it is in this world the more glorious, if in the midst of these disadvantages it exert itself in its operations". (C4,60).

It is precisely in this struggle that the symbolic power of Christ; according to some critics undervalued by Traherne, is made manifest: in the unity of present and future, "both sides the veil or screen" visible to the accomplished mystic like Traherne. Thus Christ knew that

> "all was safe which He undertook, because in humbling Himself to the death of the cross He did not forsake but attain His glory ... this and the other life are made of a piece, but this is the time of trial, that, of rewards". (C4,60).

The liberating quality of love expressed by Thomas à Kempis and directly inspiring to Traherne can be seen in this quotation from "The Imitation of Christ":

> "Love flies, runs and leaps for joy; it is free and unrestrained. Love gives all for all, resting in One who is highest above all things, from whom every good flows and proceeds"[95].

The alienation between self and the rest of creation, in particular other selves, can only be healed, then, by the transcendence of the limited self: Traherne's "insistence that each soul is the beloved son, and that unless each can be creator, none can. Creativity has to be set free"[96]. Traherne is fully aware of the way in which human intercourse without the liberation of the self can lead to suffering and guilt, as can be seen from the desolate picture painted in the second "Century":

> "Men's lips are closed because their eyes are blinded: their tongues are dumb, because their ears are deaf: and there is no life in their mouths because death is in their hearts". (C2,94).

In fact, the process of liberation is a fully social movement, for

> "he that thinks the sons of men impertinent to his joy and happiness can scarcely love them. But he that knows them to be instruments and what they are, will delight in them, and is able to use them". (C4,15).

Returning to Traherne's own self-analysis, it is interesting to observe the swift progression from material to spiritual, and from a sense of self discipline - corrective morality - to unrestrained joy:

> "he conceived it his duty and much delighted in the obligation that he was to treat every man in the whole world as the representative of mankind, and that he was to meet in him and to pay unto him all the love of God, Angels and Men". (C4,27).

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[95]Thomas à Kempis, op cit. p98.

[96]R. B. Hinman, op cit. p172.

Ultimately - and this is the crux of Traherne's Christian belief - "he thought that he was to treat every man in the person of Christ". (C4,28). Traherne moves quickly and decisively away from the peculiarities of his personal experience towards the universal and symbolic, epitomised by the figure of Christ; indeed,

> "even in the third "Century" Traherne explicitly rejects the defining and limiting claim of events. In order to be free, man must transcend the pressures of the particular and eccentric"[97].

Traherne echoes the inspiration of the "Centuries" in the rather more prosaic style of "Christian Ethicks", writing that "there is a certain kind of sympathy that runs through the universe by virtue of which all men are fed in the feeding of one", for "all are touched and concerned in every one". The unmistakable impression is of a man fully aware of the depths of sin and suffering to which all human beings may sink, yet joyously seeking any opportunity to celebrate a true communion with others: indeed the latter emotion overwhelms the former, so that "we are spiritually multiplied when we meet ourselves more sweetly, and live again in other persons" (C2,70).

Such a consciousness is able to perceive joy in all creation, and even the most unpleasant aspects of existence. In fact, far from seeking to avoid these aspects, Traherne realises that everything must be faced before a true perspective can be achieved. Further goodness heightens the individual's sensitivity to suffering and pain, as for Thomas à Kempis:

> "A good man always finds cause for grief and tears; for whether he considers himself or his neighbours, he knows that no man lives without trouble in this life"[98].

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[97]S. Stewart, op cit. p106.

[98]Thomas à Kempis, op cit. p54.

The true mystic must accept all, even the depths of human misery characterised by Traherne in Christian terms as "Hell":

> "They that look into Hell here may avoid it hereafter. They that refuse to look into Hell upon earth, to consider the manner of the torments of the damned, shall be forced in Hell to see all the earth, and remember the felicities which they had when they were living - Hell itself is a part of God's Kingdom, to wit His prison. It is fitly mentioned in the enjoyment of the world. And is itself by the happy enjoyed, as part of the world". (C1,48).

Such a concept is reinforced in the poem "The Vision":

> "Even Trades them selvs seen in Celestial Light,
> And Cares and Sins and Woes are Bright".

The perspective is enlarged as the poem continues:

> "Mens Woes shall be but foyls unto thy Bliss
> Thou once enjoying this:
> Trades shall adorn and Beautify the Earth,
> Their ignorance shall make thee Bright..."

Finally, unity is achieved,

> "From One, to One, in one to see All Things".

The question asserts itself increasingly urgently as we read Traherne's words: how exactly is this liberation to be achieved? The key lies in the transmutation of vice into its opposite, and, particularly, in the transformation of desire. Traherne seems to have possessed a strong and enthusiastic respect for the power of passionate desire, and a dislike for lack of feeling. Anticipating the romantic glorification of emotion even when negative, he even asserts that hatred itself is preferable, at least from the receiving end, to lukewarmness, for "to be hated is to be rejected, but to be beloved lukewarmly is to be embraced with polluted and filthy arms"[99]. At no time in Traherne's work - and this is certainly unusual for a Christian writer on ethics - is the blame for sin and suffering on this earth laid at the feet of desire. On the contrary, the gratification of desire is central to

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[99]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p101.

Traherne's philosophy, for "the desire satisfied is a Tree of Life"[100]. At least one critic[101], in what appears to be a rather disapproving tone, has discerned a Faustian quality in Traherne's notion of desire, stating that Traherne wishes to make Faust acceptable to Christianity, "as he virtually does when he makes insatiableness the source of creativity and the mode of love". Traherne's aptly entitled poem "Desire" expresses forcefully the agony, at once both physical and spiritual, of unfulfilled desire:

> "My Parch'd and Wither'd Bones
> Burnt up did seem; My Soul was full of Groans.....
> My Heart a deep profound Abyss,
> And evry Joy and Pleasure but a Wound
> So long as I my Blessedness did miss.
> 0 Happiness! A Famine burns,
> And all my life to Anguish turns!"

Few on reading this could doubt that Traherne did indeed suffer his personal "dark night of the soul"; few could fail to realise that he felt deeply the frequently frustrating nature of life and its spiritual quest. In this there is certainly a direct sympathy between Faust and Traherne, who returns to and develops the theme in a later poem, "Solitude":

> "O Eden Fair
> Where shall I seek the Soul of Holy Joy
> Since I to find it here despair;
> Nor in the shining Day
> Nor in the Shade,
> Nor in the Field, nor in a Trade
> I can it see? Felicity! 0 where
> Shall I thee find to eas my Mind! 0 Where!"

It is interesting in this poem to notice the direction and expectation of Traherne's desperate questioning: there can be no specific answer, for the answer lies in the question itself. A full realisation of the nature

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[100]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", ibid. p273.

[101]R. B. Hinman, op cit. p171.

of the question leads to, or more accurately actually is, the realisation that consciousness itself possesses the infinite, "Felicity". Elsewhere in this poem Traherne belies his knowledge of this essential truth through joy-inspiring images of "the shining day", the "Bells ringing" and the woods, fields, and springs. Clearly the answer lies not in external reality, but with the transformation of the self: "An angel will be happy anywhere, and a devil miserable". (C4,37).

Naturally enough, the expression of such suffering as we have seen above is from the vantage point of felicity, looking back to a time when, in Traherne's own life, felicity was keenly desired as "som great thing", yet seemed unattainable. Even the basest of human attributes have within themselves the possibility of liberation from suffering, and what is commonly held to be sinful is more appropriately termed misguided. Ambition and covetousness, as examples of base desires, are "virtues when they are means conducive to the highest end; vices when they distract and entangle us with inferior objects"[102]. Desires and wants, then,

> "as they usually appear in the world of men are simply misdirections of noble inclinations which if rightly directed would enable us to possess everything"[103].

The transformation of desire is thus crucially important to Traherne's ethical framework and is frequently stressed by him, nowhere more lucidly than in the final section of "Christian Ethicks":

> "There is ever upon us some pressing want in this world, and will be, till we are infinitely satisfied with varieties and degrees of glory ... Till we are satisfied we are so clamorous and greedy as if there were no pleasure but in receiving all. When we have it, we are so full that we know not what to do with it. We are in danger of bursting, till we can communicate all to some fit and

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[102]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p38.

[103]R. D. Jordan, op cit. p80.

> amicable recipient; and more delight in the communication than we did in the reception. This is the foundation of real gratitude, and the bottom of all that goodness...".

Here we can see clearly again how gratified desire, felicity itself, is a fully social process.

Human freedom is for Traherne both means to and end of felicity; the true direction of desire is only to be achieved through the positive use of freedom of choice, and the state of being thus attained is one of total freedom. Traherne's thoughts on human freedom tell us much of his ethical position. We have seen already the marvellous freedom of childhood expressed by Traherne, and he is aware throughout his writing that "all goodness is spoiled by compulsion". The implication of this incisive observation is that much of the world's suffering stems from the imposition of a philosophy or social order by some on others - particularly and most regrettably by the adult upon the innocence of the child. Freedom to Traherne, is fundamental to human nature, and "were men divested of their liberty [they] would be reduced to the estate of stones and trees"[104]. He is always more concerned to stress the positive, purposive freedom of choice than the allocation of blame for any previous wrong use of free will whether by mankind generally or by any individual. Thus the choice is ever present to relinquish sin or to practise it, and the original choice of Adam to lapse into sin seems to be of secondary importance. Traherne goes considerably further than most, even than his contemporaries and in many respects like minds the Cambridge Platonists, in stressing this freedom, for in free will lies the wellspring of felicity. When such freedom is combined with fully realised love, man goes well beyond any other of his qualities:

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[104]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p103.

"One Voluntary Act of Love
Far more Delightfull to his Soul does prove
And is above all these as far as Love"[105].

Freedom both amplifies the potential glory of mankind, and, as a direct corollary, explains the seemingly amoral nature of the universe to which C. S. Lewis refers in our original quotation. In Traherne's words, "God made man a free agent for his own advantage, and left him in the hand of his own counsel, that he might be the more glorious", (C4,42), and it is exactly the exercise of this freedom which demands a neutral context within which to operate. This requirement must apply both to the nature of man and to the nature of external reality. Stanley Stewart has observed that "Traherne specifically rejects the notion that man is naturally inclined towards the good"[106], for such a notion would devalue the exercise of man's free will. Rather, Stewart defines Traherne's thought in this context as within the Arminian tradition of Christianity, which "sought a middle ground between the felt secularism of Pelagius on the one hand and the determinism of Calvin on the other". Such a definition seems to me entirely appropriate, as long as Traherne's way is not seen as a straightforward compromise between two extremes. It is, rather, the product of his own exhaustive working out of thought and experience through "Highest Reason".

If we can relate the exercise of freedom to the stages of psychic development perceived by Traherne and outlined earlier, we can see in the state of innocence a freedom prior to self-consciousness and its accompanying morality, in the state of grace the progress towards a

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[105]Thomas Traherne, "The Recovery", p58, l.68-70.

[106]S. Stewart, op cit. p61.

fully moral choice, and finally in the state of glory the reward which is perfect freedom and transcends morality. Traherne is concerned principally with advice to those existing in the state of grace. God's words to Adam, paraphrased by Pico della Mirandola and quoted by Traherne, are relevant here:

> "We have made thee neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, that being the honoured former and framer of thyself, thou mayest shape thyself into what nature thyself pleasest". (C4,76).

In the following meditation Traherne expands on the idea in terms of natural, organic growth:

> "God infused the seeds of every kind of life into man; Whatever seeds every one chooseth those spring up with him, and the fruits of those shall he bear and enjoy. If sensual things are chosen by him, he shall become a beast; if reasonable a celestial creature; if intellectual an Angel and a Son of God; and if content with the lot of us creatures, he withdraws himself into the centre of his own unity, he shall be one Spirit with God, and dwell above all in the solitary darkness of His Eternal Father". (C4,77),

again using free quotation of Pico. The words of Meister Eckhart, arch exponent of the via negativa, again spring to mind: "Keep this in mind: to be full of things is to be empty of God, while to be empty of things is to be full of God"[107]. Interestingly enough, C. S. Lewis makes a similar point in the rather less poetically evocative style of the twentieth century - a central tenet of his argument that Christian faith is compatible with a world containing obvious pain and suffering, for "not even Omnipotence could create a society of free souls without at the same time creating a relatively independent and "inexorable Nature"[108]. The gift of freedom transforms the human spirit, and again Traherne turns to the imagery of natural growth to express this:

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[107]Meister Eckhart, "About Disinterest", op cit, p85.

[108]C. S. Lewis, op cit. p17.

> "By giving me all things else, He hath made even afflictions themselves my treasures. The sharpest trials, are the finest furbishing. The most tempestuous weather is the best seed time. A Christian is an oak flourishing in winter". (C4,91).

As human consciousness expands towards the point of the positive exercise of its precious freedom, it gains awareness of its own infinite power. The autobiographical section of the third "Century" which we examined previously deals with Traherne's own experience of this developing awareness. The primacy of consciousness is always apparent in his work, and this is at all times potentially infinite:

> "Few will believe the soul to be infinite, yet infinity is the first thing which is naturally known. Bounds and limits are discerned only in a secondary manner. Suppose a man were born deaf and blind. By the very feeling of his soul, he apprehends infinity about him, infinite space, infinite darkness. He thinks not of wall and limits till he feels them and is stopped by them. That things are finite therefore we learn by our senses. But infinity we know and feel by our souls: and feel it so naturally, as if it were the very essence and being of the soul". (C2,81).

Perception and experience merge, as consciousness expands to heal the alienation between subject and object: "the contemplation of Eternity maketh the soul immortal" (C1,55). Traherne's philosophy

> "affirms the truth, that object and subject exist only as aberrations from the concrete experience of perception, which experience includes subject and object as the end limits of a single integrated reality"[109].

Thus charged, the human spirit cannot but become magnanimous, transcending suffering through the compassionate inclusion of it, and transcending sin through forgiveness: "a magnanimous soul is always awake. The whole globe of earth is but a nutshell in comparison of its enjoyments"[110].

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[109]A. L. Clements, op cit. p73.

[110]Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p245.

We can now see that Traherne, in a very real sense, is concerned primarily with de-mythologising the mystic way, with making it accessible to the interested reader:

> "The real "message" of Traherne is not to return to the perception of childhood, or even to seek a mystic opening to eternity and immensity, but rather to improve the faculties to the point where they become infinite and divine"[111].

Traherne's obvious pleasure in the natural world is the basis of his conscious use of sensuous imagery throughout the prose and poetry, and underlies his refusal to turn his back on the earthly life. This, I think, has a great deal to do with the approachability of his thought:

> "he rises from a keen sense of the physical world as an embodiment of the Divine to an ever higher level of abstraction, but one which never loses touch with his roots"[112].

This essential quality, which permeates the entire body of his work, enables Traherne to be fully magnanimous and forgiving while alive on this world. So the agony and liberation of Christ, far from being devalued, as we have noted that some critics maintain, are crucial and entirely relevant to his philosophy. Christ, in fact, is for Traherne the archetype of the suffering yet forgiving human soul:

> "I cannot meet with Sin, but it kills me, and 'tis only by Jesus Christ that I can kill it, and escape. Would you blame me to be confounded, when I have offended my Eternal Father, who gave me all the things in Heaven and Earth? One Sin is a dreadful stumbling block in the way to heaven. It breeds a long parenthesis in the fruition of our joys. Do you not see, my friend, how it disorders and disturbs my proceeding? There is no calamity but sin alone". (C3,51).

In Traherne's view the essential redeeming feature for man is the power to love, which gives birth to the spirit of compassion and forgiveness.

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[111] R. D. Jordan, op cit. p45.

[112] S. C. Seelig, op cit. p111.

Traherne follows the traditional mystical insight in giving primary place to love, as expressed, for example, in "The Cloud of Unknowing":

> "For if this love is there in truth, so too will all other virtues truly, perfectly and knowingly, be included in it...".

Indeed,

> "repentance without love is so far from seating us in the felicity of heaven that it is one of the ingredients of the torments of hell, a natural effect of sin, and a great part of the misery of devils",

for,

> "love is that which sanctifies repentance"[113].

Love has a transforming power and elevates man to the level of the Divine, and "By loving all things, as God loveth them, we transform our wills into an act of love, which is most sweet and blessed"[114]. In the "Centuries" Traherne stresses the unifying force of love: "Love in the fountain, and love in the end is the glory of the world and the Soul of Joy". (C2,62). Further,

> "When you love men, the world quickly becometh yours; and yourself become a greater treasure than the world is. For all their persons are your treasures, and all the things in Heaven and Earth that serve them, are yours. For those are the riches of love, which minister to its Object". (C2,64).

We are now in a position to perceive the full scope of Traherne's ethical philosophy, and undoubtedly there is neither escapism nor a failure to grasp the issues. The meaningless universe posited by C. S. Lewis's imaginary protagonist is transformed by the loving, forgiving power of human consciousness in full social operation. Again it is one of William Blake's epithets which seems relevant: "Mutual forgiveness of each vice, such are the gates of paradise". Traherne's philosophy and experience, however, undoubtedly speak for themselves:

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[113] "The Cloud of Unknowing", op cit. p77.

[114] Thomas Traherne, "Christian Ethicks", op cit. p80.

"Thus you see I can make merry with calamities, and while I grieve at Sins and war against them, abhoring the world, and myself more, descend into the abyss of humility, and there admire a new offspring and torrent of joys - God's Mercies. Which accepteth of our fidelity in bloody battles, though every wound defile and poison; and when we slip or fall, turneth our true penitent tears into solid pearl, that shall abide with Him for evermore. But oh let us take heed that we never willingly commit a sin against so gracious a Redeemer, and so great a Father". (C3,48).

## 5. Traherne in Cultural Context: Henry Vaughan and Gerrard Winstanley.

We can now move to a reasonably detailed comparison between Traherne's writing and that of two other writers whose major works were completed in the third quarter of the Seventeenth Century: Henry Vaughan and Gerrard Winstanley. The two figures, the one an Anglican clergyman and poet of religious experience and longing, the other a radical anti-clerical political activist, seem absolutely dissimilar from each other, and in many respects also from Traherne. Although both were writing their best work some twenty years before Traherne, they are, broadly, his contemporaries; closer in time to the turmoil of ideas and activity surrounding the English Civil War and Commonwealth periods, there is nevertheless a similar concern for the processes of liberation from constraint - whether imposed by the self or by society. So, despite qualifications, I feel that a study of Vaughan and Winstanley's writing may serve several constructive purposes appropriate to this assessment of Traherne's work. In the first place, it is important to place Traherne's philosophy in a broader historical and literary perspective than has been hitherto possible in this study. Secondly, examination of Vaughan and Winstanley may further illuminate strands of thought and their literary expression shared with Traherne: difficult concepts, often, which it is as well to see expressed in different ways and with variation in tone and emphasis. Finally, I hope to further define and establish Traherne's individuality through contrast. I have deliberately chosen pieces of writing by both Vaughan and Winstanley which at least approximate to Traherne's own work, although not to the exclusion of other works by both writers when they seem relevant. Principally, then, I shall be looking at the poetry and 1655 preface of "Silex Scintillans" (1650, revised and expanded in 1655) by Henry Vaughan, and Gerrard Winstanley's "Fire in the Bush" (1650).

In the case of Vaughan, frequently likened to Traherne in general surveys of seventeenth century English literature, the most striking similarity to Traherne is a shared deep concern for a mystic appraisal of truth - the visionary mode of writing and thought. In terms of the powerfully evocative symbolism of light, used, as we have seen, extensively by Traherne, Vaughan is able to produce verse of impact, beauty and immediacy similar, in effect at least, to that of Traherne. The poem "The World" establishes his experience of the numinous, expressed through the traditional imagery patterns of mysticism - particularly here the unbroken circle and the purity of light:

> "I saw Eternity the other night
> Like a great Ring of pure and endless light" (p466,1.1-2)[115].

The fascination with light is evident throughout the verse of "Silex Scintillans"; however, it is rarely directly seen, as here, for normally it is clouded over, preventing total vision. As Vaughan develops the imagery and theme of the poem, he is concerned to point out the merely relative value of all human achievements in time and space, as compared to the attainment of unity in the pervasive sense of harmony so evocatively expressed above. Again, the similarity to Traherne is striking. However, Vaughan's language when dealing with this earthly existence seems to take on a deliberately harsh and derogatory tone, juxtaposing a sense of disgust - the "dark night"; "this dead and dark abode" - with the experience of divine light. There is a hint here of a possible contrast between Vaughan and Traherne. To Traherne, as we have seen, this life blends into the next, and although he can be critical of men's folly in wasting the gift of life, there is never a sense of despair with life itself as frequently becomes apparent in Vaughan's thought. Indeed, there always appears to be a hint of possible salvation, based on God's universal forgiveness:

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115"The Works of Henry Vaughan", ed. L. C. Martin, Oxford, 1957. Subsequent quotations of Vaughan's poetry and prose from this volume unless stated otherwise.

"He can never therefore be reconciled to your sin, because sin itself is incapable of being altered: but He may be reconciled to your person, because that may be restored..." (C2,30).

As Vaughan's poem "The World" nears its close we realise that the poet's amazement at human folly is indeed tempered by the possibility of redemption, but that this redemption, far from being universal, seems to be selective in an almost Calvinist sense:

"But as I did their madnes so discusse
One whisper'd thus,
This Ring the Bride-groome did for none provide
But for his bride". (p467,l.57-60)

Such a sense of personal salvation, even if desired rather than achieved, with its implication of separation from the rest of mankind, is alien to Traherne's thought. What is lacking, in effect, is the social sense necessary to expand and develop actively any intuitive mystic insight. It is interesting that in one poem we can perceive both important similarities and differences between the two poets to be highlighted. We can judge Traherne's achievement all the more accurately: there is the possibility that he avoids a trap all too easy to fall into - the trap of self-obsession of which there is a distinct hint in Vaughan's religious outlook.

In Vaughan's poem "Religion" is displayed the visionary ability to see and converse with Biblical characters in an almost familiar way, and the poem reads as a powerful plea for direct vision and revelation as the only true basis for religious belief. Opposed to this in the poem is the corruption and vulgarisation of spirituality in the world generally, which only seem to offer spiritual satisfaction:

"... at first sight doth many please,
But drunk, is puddle or meere slime,
And 'stead of Phisick, a disease". (p405,l.42-44)

Traherne would surely have agreed, and it is an important point of contact between the two poets. The imagery also is familiar: of disease and its possible healing by appropriate spiritual medicine. Yet, for all the similarities there seems a rather sweeping condemnation by Vaughan of the religious aspirations of the "many", which I feel Traherne is unlikely to make. There is a considerable disenchantment with the world in Vaughan, and a correspondingly strong desire to cultivate his own exclusively private religious intuition. It often seems to be the negative emotion which is most powerful and deeply felt in the writing of Vaughan, and this directly contrasts to Traherne's sense of optimistic buoyancy - surely a positive force. But we need to examine more of Vaughan's work before we can discern more clearly this often very subtle difference in emphasis.

The experience and symbolism of childhood are, as we have seen, central to Traherne's philosophy, and Vaughan shares a similar concern, frequently pointed out by various critics. Louis Martz, for example, has discerned an Augustinian basis for this common insistence on childhood innocence, despite Augustine's more usual reputation insisting upon a need for strict discipline and adult-inspired wisdom on childhood: the principle of original sin in practice. Martz quotes from Augustine's "Confessions": "Good therefore is he that made me; yea he is my good, and to him will I rejoice for all my good gifts, which of a child I had"[116]. Certainly here he is emphasising innocence, yet such sentiments are rare indeed in Augustine's writing. I feel, rather, that the most important influence on both writers in this respect is Biblical, from the New Testament - showing also their intimate knowledge and relatively individual interpretation of the Bible, typically Protestant. Thus Matthew records Christ's example:

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[116]St. Augustine, "Confessions", 1:20.

> "And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in a midst of them. And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me"[117].

Likewise, John relates Jesus's words to the Pharisee Nicodemus, exhorting him, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"[118]. We have here, I think, a common pool of mystical insight into the need for rebirth[119], from which both writers draw. Let us now look more closely at the ways in which Vaughan uses and describes the symbol and reality of childhood in his poetry, before arriving at any conclusions concerning similarities to and differences from Traherne.

In the poem "Childe-hood". Vaughan's opening lines introduce a sense both of attraction and unattainability:

> "I cannot reach it; and my striving eye
> dazles at it, as at eternity". (p520,l.1-2)

Childhood innocence is clearly likened to the light of eternity, as for Traherne, yet as the poem progresses the reader is given an impression almost of envy for the ease and naturalness of childhood, with the clear implication that the adult poet lacks the qualities which enable the child to

> "... by mear playing go to Heaven". (p520,l.8)

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[117]Matthew, 18:2-5.

[118]John, 3:3.

[119]Other mystic writers, of course, shared similar views. Boehme, for example, writes, "Little children are our schoolmasters till evil stirre in them".

Childhood is described in terms of a lost golden age of innocence, even idealised:

> "Dear, harmless age! The short swift span,
> Where weeping virtue parts with man". (p521,1.31-32)

There remains the intense need to re-live childhood perceptions:

> "An age of mysteries! which he
> Must live twice, that would God's face see". (p521,1.35-36)

yet it is a sense of unrecoverable loss which seems most prominent. The most moving of Vaughan's poems on this theme is "The Burial of an Infant"; it is moving in its powerful, unsentimental immediacy:

> "Sweetly didst thou expire: Thy soul
> Flew home unstain'd by his new kin,
> For ere thou knew'st how to be foul,
> Death wean'd thee from the world, and sin".
> (p450,1.5-8)

The consolation here is in the belief that the child had never sin, for Vaughan seems to feel that adult sin is inevitable as experience separates the human soul from God the source. Thus the child dies innocent, "unstain'd" by knowledge, in the midst of

> "The days and nights of my first happy age;
> An age without distast and warrs". ("Looking Back")
> (p660,1.3-4)

The transition from such innocence to adult experience is related autobiographically, in a tone reminiscent of Traherne, in the poem "Regeneration":

> "Yet was it frost within,
> And surly winds
> Blasted my infant buds, and since
> Like clouds eclips'd my mind". (p397,1.5-8)

A section of the lengthy didactic poem "Rules and Lessons" reinforces the need to return to primal innocence:

> "Allow you Joyes Religion; That done, speed
> And bring the same man back, thou wert at first.
> Who so returns not, cannot pray aright,
> But shuts his door, and leaves God out all night".
> (p438,1.81-84)

The most detailed exposition of the theme is in the poem "The Retreate", which begins with a celebration of childhood very similar to that of Traherne:

> "Happy those early dayes! when I
> Shin'd in my Angell-infancy", (p419,l.1-2)

and goes on to describe the coming of experience as "taught", with regard to both perception and language:

> "Before I taught my tongue to wound
> My conscience with a sinfull sound,
> Or had the black art to dispense
> A sev'rall sin to ev'ry sence". (p419,l.3-6)

Ultimately, however, the poem is nostalgic rather than purposive:

> "O how I long to travell back
> And tread again that ancient track!" (p419,l.21-2)

The final union brought in by death is recognised as identical to the primal:

> "Some men a forward motion love
> But I by backward steps would move,
> And when this dust falls to the urn
> In that state I came return". (p420,l.29-32)

Yet even here the direction is, quite plainly, backward looking: seeking to re-live the actual experience of childhood rather than constructively using the mental state remembered from childhood as a powerful symbol in the liberation of the whole, adult being.

It is instructive to compare Traherne to Vaughan in respect of this central theme, for, as I have described previously, Traherne's use of it is always forward looking, never regressive. It is, I think, true that both poets view childhood as a state of candid purity remarkable in its resilience, and both are concerned with an upheaval of subconscious memories of an Eden-like childhood into the adult's state of being,

> "but whereas Vaughan, feeling himself alienated, longs to "travell back", Traherne claims to have attained again and to enjoy. He seems to be writing from some later radiant conviction and seeing the early days enhanced in its light.

> The state ... is one of learning yet of possession, something belonging to childhood yet deeper than a child's first conscious knowledge"[120].

The distinction between the poets serves to emphasise the originality and robust quality of Traherne's position: a similarity in basic preoccupation highlights very significant differences in emphasis, treatment and even direction. In some respects, Vaughan's position is highly unfortunate: he seems to have possessed sufficient intellectual insight to value childhood vision, yet not the intuitive ability to progress from this insight. It is testimony indeed to Traherne's profundity that he is able to marry intellect with insight in "Highest Reason".

In terms of the tradition out of which both Vaughan and Traherne were writing, we can learn much from looking at the central influences on the older writer, for in the combination of Christianity and esoteric philosophy we have a dynamic and powerful mode of thought fairly prevalent amongst the spiritual and intellectual seekers of the mid-seventeenth century. We have already seen the possibility of an Augustinian influence on Traherne and Vaughan. The combination of a belief in human potential with conventionally appreciated depravity is relevant to both, although Vaughan gives greater emphasis to the latter than does Traherne, following perhaps more closely the traditional Augustinian line of thought:

> "Human nature is a great thing, but because it is not the highest it was liable to spoiling; and although liable to spoiling because it is not the highest, yet because it has a capacity for the highest and is able to become partaker in it, it remains great"[121].

Certainly there is common to both writers a desire for the creative awakening of the faculty of memory as the first step in what appears to be the rediscovery of a Jungian collective unconscious. Within the Christian tradition also is an intense awareness of the symbolic power

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[120]Elizabeth Holmes, "Henry Vaughan and the Hermetic Philosophy", Oxford, 1932, p21.

[121]St. Augustine, "De Trinitate", 14:6.

of the Bible, and a particular delight in the psalms of David, who can be seen as the archetype of the devotional poet.

Outside mainstream Christianity it is possible to discern strong Platonic and Hermetic influences, the latter especially important for Vaughan through the agency of such writers as Pico, Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, Jacob Boehme and his own brother Thomas Vaughan. It has been suggested[122] that for both writers, but particularly for Vaughan, there was a reluctance to explore the full scope of mystical insight because of a limiting adherence to centrally Christian doctrine. It is difficult to assess accurately such a contention. When a certain tradition plays such an important part in the creation of mystical apprehension of the universe as to have it defined linguistically and philosophically in its own terms, it may well be that such a tradition supplies its own experiential limits. I feel, however, that Traherne was more able than was Vaughan to transcend the limits of conventional Christianity: he seems more at home with the truly liberating concepts of infinity, pre-existence and natural innocence, possibly because Vaughan, in the midst of the spiritual and social turmoil of the Civil War, felt it more necessary to grasp and hold on to a conservative theology, for all his fascination with Hermetic ideas.

In particular there is in Vaughan's work a far greater emphasis on sin - a more doctrinaire Augustinian view of the fall than that espoused by Traherne - and this indeed shows just how radical is Traherne's own position.

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[122]see, for example, A. Low, op cit. p199: " ... probably Vaughan had a mystical experience or mystical experiences some time in the late 1640's or early 1650's. Since, as an Anglican, he inhabited a milieu hostile to mysticisms, he very likely did not develop these experiences as fully as he might otherwise have done".

> "Man's corruption and mortality, his perversity, his pride and self-righteousness, in short, the fruits of his original sin, are continually at the forefront of Vaughan's attention, and his view of the fall is the severe interpretation of the Reformation Augustine"[123].

Frequently in Vaughan's writing there appears what can only be called an obsession with human sinfulness and culpability, and the resulting emotions are guilt and self-mortification. Such thoughts are more extensively developed in Vaughan's prose than in his poetry, and it is possible to discern a philosophic distinction between the two modes:

> "Vaughan's theory of the fall followed St. Augustine. But Vaughan's most successful poetry - that which blossoms into sudden awareness of the divinity of the cosmos and creates for us a sense of the animism of all creation - tends to give us a different and more latitudinarian experience of man's fallen nature and condition. While his prose seems too firmly Augustinian for the optimism about human nature that characterises the latitudinarians, his poetry is nonetheless closer to the Cambridge Platonists than to John Donne's 'Holy Sonnets'"[124].

In the prose "Mount of Olives" Vaughan writes with apparent desolation:

> "I shall hold it no paradox to affirme there are no pleasures in this world",

and, with specific regard to himself,

> "What an habitation of darknesse and death wilt thou find within me? What abominable desolations and emptinesse? What barrenesse and disorders wilt thou see there?"

Even human righteousness is characterised as negative:

> "But all my righteousnesse is a filthy rag, my heart neither new nor undefiled, but a nest of unclean birds, where they have not only laine, but hatched and brought forth their viperous young ones"[125].

It would be hard indeed to imagine Traherne writing in such terms; even the imagery of birth and newness as somehow "unclean" and

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[123]P. Grant, op cit. p147.

[124]P. Grant, ibid. p168.

[125]Vaughan, "Works", pp160-162.

"viperous" runs contrary to the entire direction of Traherne's thought, and the social implications of Vaughan's perception of human nature are clear:

> "The greatest part of men, which we commonly terme the populacy, are a stiffe, uncivill generation, without any seed of honour or goodnesse, and sensible of nothing but private interest, and the base waies of acquiring it"[126].

The extremity of this view is not simply in its conclusions about human behaviour, but in the absence of any potential for good: "without any seed"; we can see at work, as noted above, a distinctly Calvinist theology. We have also noted previously that Traherne's emphasis on active charity and love enables him to bridge the gap between private mystic and public churchman; Vaughan, for all the frequent mystical insight of his poetry, does not appear to have found a similar bridge, and there remains a sense of alienation in his work as a whole which places Traherne's wholeness and consistency in clearer perspective.

In several other important respects the two poets have points of contact. Both base their religious philosophies on their own experiences, and both seek to transcend the conditions of their personal and deeply felt apostasies - although Vaughan has suffered from the same type of criticism we noted previously applied to Traherne[127]. Both have an intense feeling for the numinosity of nature and its potential for religious symbolism, together with a perception of the divinity which, for the mystic, lies everywhere behind nature. This divinity in creation is explained by Traherne in terms of his central idea of the "Golden Mean", as we have seen, and Vaughan's formulation is similar both stylistically and philosophically:

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[126]H. Vaughan, "The Life of Holy Paulinus", quoted by P. Grant, ibid. p150.

[127]See, for example, E. Holmes, op cit. p25: "His religious experiences do not appear as acutely defined problems or conflicts".

"Were all the year one constant Sun-shine, we
Should have no flowers,
All would be drought and leaness; not a tree
Would make us bowres;
Beauty consists of colours; and that's best
Which is not fix't, but flies, and flowes".
("Affliction") (p460,1.21-26)

Such a delight in what is fleeting, yet, paradoxically, through human perception made eternal, is typical of both poets at the height of their sensibilities, and has much to do with the endurance of their work.

In his prose preface to the 1655 edition of "Silex Scintillans"[128], Vaughan outlines his purpose in writing poetry: to stimulate the reader towards a spiritual awakening, a purpose symbolised in the emblem of the title page, and contrasted to the vain poetic artifices of the "prattlers". The need, according to Vaughan, is for a simpler and more direct style suitable for this purpose, and ultimately to charge language with its full potential power to transform through a renewed simplicity. Vaughan seems to be acutely aware that the fall of man was accompanied by a fallen language, devoid of symbolic power and pristine clarity. In this there is a clear similarity to Traherne's professed thoughts on language, its uses and misuses. Yet in this same preface Vaughan takes his invective against the despised "prattlers" to such an extreme that the reader is left with a negative impression of the poet himself. Vaughan castigates

"those ingenious persons, which in the late notion are termed Wits",

and as the preface develops so does the unwholesomeness of the imagery:

"Where the Sun is busie upon a dung hill, the issue is always some uncleane vermine",

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[128]Vaughan, "Works", pp388-392.

and

"he that unites idle books, makes for himself another body, in which he always lives, and sins (after death) as fast and as foul, as ever he did in his life, which very consideration deserves to be sufficient Antidote against this evil disease".

It may well be that such vehement criticism is in fact the ardour of the convert, yet the unmistakable impression is of one too concerned with the failings and misdirections of others. Traherne, on the other hand, states his stylistic purpose simply and briefly, and then concentrates on his own thoughts: he does not seem to have the need for self-justification and self-defence, such is his intellectual confidence.

It seems to me impossible to escape in Vaughan a certain sense of failure in his religious quest - a failure we have touched upon several times and which can be expressed in various ways and moods: desolation, nostalgia, yearning and self-mortification all possibly playing a part. His solution seems to have been to hope and pray for the second coming which will solve all his problems definitively, but existentially this is not really a solution at all. Vaughan's poem "Peace", for example, posits a world both formal and ideal, archetypically harmonious:

> "There above noise, and danger
> Sweet peace sits crown'd with smiles", (p430,l.5-6)

yet remains a "remote outpost of the elect more picturesque than sublime"[129]. The deep yearning of the poem "Chearfulness":

> "O that I were all Soul! That thou
> Wouldst make each part
> Of this poor, sinfull frame pure heart", (p429,l.17-18)

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[129]Jonathan F. S. Post, "Henry Vaughan - The Unfolding Vision", Princeton, 1982, p165.

is frequently dominant in Vaughan's poetry. The feeling for the infinite is often imagined rather than experienced, and thus underlines the inadequacy felt by Vaughan:

> "O that I were winged and free,
> And quite undrest, just now with thee,
> Were freed souls dived by living fountains
> On everlasting, spicy mountains".
> ("Fair and Young Light)(p513,l.1-4)

At times such as these the yearning appears almost fatuous. Life on this world, in fact, is seen as hopeless, or at most containing only the smallest possibility of making a beginning on the road to salvation. The logic of Vaughan's position leads inexorably to a plea for death:

> "But these chaste fountains flow not till we dye;
> Some drops may fall before, but a clear spring
> And ever running, till we leave to fling
> Dirt in her way, will keep above the skie".
> ("The Timber")(p499,l.53-56)

This sentiment is perhaps the greatest contrast to the emotions expressed by Traherne, for whom life always appears as a precious gift. It is this emotional basis which, I think, enables Traherne to reach his truly creative synthesis and peace, compared to the restlessness and unfulfilment of Vaughan:

> "Man is the shuttle, to whose winding quest
> And passage through these looms
> God ordered motion, but ordain'd no rest".
> ("Man")(p477,l.26-28)

Gerrard Winstanley we cannot judge by the same criteria as Vaughan: he did not set out to become a successful poet, nor a religious philosopher, in the sense that Vaughan did. Rather, Winstanley was primarily a political activist, and for this reason contrasts markedly with both Traherne and Vaughan. But we must not see political activity as necessarily distinct from the possibilities of mystical and religious experience; certainly such a distinction is not apparent, generally, in Seventeenth Century radicalism, or in Winstanley's thought

particularly. We have seen earlier the aptness of T. S. Eliot's description of intellectual development after the seventeenth century as "disassociation of sensibility", and the historian of radical thought and movements E. P. Thompson in "The Making of the English Working Classes", has analysed the unity of politics and religious thought amongst radicals prior to the "disassociation". Much of Winstanley's writing combines religious insight with political theory; he seems equally at home in both worlds, and indeed the two complement each other very effectively. I feel, then, that a direct comparison between Winstanley and Traherne may well shed further light on the latter's message of liberation, and whether it can in any sense be termed radical.

Winstanley and Traherne share a similar relationship towards Biblical texts - not simply a typically Protestant familiarity with the Bible, but more creatively an incisive feel for spiritual and symbolic meaning rather than with historical truth. Such a use of the Bible has implications of personal salvation and immediacy - personal not in the sense of being divorced from the rest of society, but of experiencing for oneself the truth of spiritual experience. The real power of the Bible, for both writers, and for Vaughan also, lies in its profoundly symbolic message to each and every soul, leading away from the actualities of worldly life towards a deep realisation of the possibilities of both consciousness and activity. Winstanley's belief is in a "religion of the heart" whereby "the whole scriptures are but a report of spiritual mysteries, held forth to the eye of the flesh in words, but to be seen in the substantial matter of them by the eye of the spirit"[130]. Such a mythological interpretation of the Bible is clear throughout

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[130]Gerrard Winstanley, quoted by Christopher Hill in "The World Turned Upside Down", London, 1975, p144.

Traherne's "Centuries" also, specifically with regard to the tremendous symbolic power of the Cross,

> "... the abyss of wonders, the centre of desires, the school of virtues, the house of wisdom, the throne of love, the theatre of joys, and the place of sorrows; it is the root of happiness, and the gate of Heaven". (C1,58).

Through such a symbolic focal point, consciousness is able to transcend the binding limits of space and time: "There we may see the most distant things in Eternity united: all mysteries at once couched together and explained". (C1,59).

Especially relevant here is the symbolic conception of the fall, with its implications for the nature of sin and guilt. We have seen Traherne's insistence that the fall repeats itself in every person, and it is this which makes it so important, rather than its historical occurrence or otherwise. Winstanley's attitude is similar, although more explicitly revolutionary, for "In the beginning of time the great creator Reason made the earth to be a common treasuary", but such a birthright is destroyed by the socially inspired evils of covetousness, appropriation of private property and exploitation of other people, until the earth becomes "a place wherein one torments another"[131]. Winstanley is able to extend his analysis to a general critique of the state as built on the foundations of a Fall-inspired theology, with the property relationships and "self-love" responsible for the false theology rather than vice-versa, thus giving political expression to ideas common to Traherne before the latter actually wrote. In a sense Winstanley anticipates and explores the deeper implications of Traherne's own position, both

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[131]Gerrard Winstanley, "The Law of Freedom and Other Writings", edited by Christopher Hill, Penguin, 1968, p36.

actively and theoretically. In "The Fire in the Bush"[132] Winstanley outlines eventually four elements of anti-Christian forces at work negatively in the social conditions of his time: the religion of hypocrisy with its merely intellectual "university divinity"; the "kingly power" based on conquest, violence and domination of others; the principles of the law as the "declarative will of the conquerors"; and the economic exploitation of division brought about by the "buying and selling of the earth". The problem and its solution assume apocalyptic proportions:

> "These are the four beasts ... that rise up out of the sea to oppress, burden and destroy universal love, and their return back into the sea will be the rising up of love, who is the son of righteousness causing daylight". (pp233-235)

If such a liberation from social bondage is to occur, it is clearly necessary for man to be, potentially if not fundamentally, self-less and good. We have examined Traherne's position in this respect: his emphasis on human freedom to choose between various ways of life, but based on an innocence which is visionary and infinite in its felicity. For Winstanley, again using the Bible symbolically, it is the "garden of Eden which is the spirit of man" (p214), and his concern throughout his writing is for a Traherne-like life of abundance and enjoyment. For the historian Christopher Hill, editor of and authority on Winstanley, Vaughan and Traherne are indistinguishable in their timidity as compared with Winstanley's radicalism, as they

> "did not carry through to Winstanley's theological universalism, which was ultimately to break the bonds of eternal hell. So they stayed within the limits of theological respectability: they were 'quaint'"[133].

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[132]Gerrard Winstanley, "The Fire in the Bush", in the previously cited edition of his writings. Subsequent quotations are from this particular essay unless stated otherwise. The chief ideas are grouped in chapters, by Winstanley, for which page references are given at the end of the appropriate paragraph in this thesis.

[133]Christopher Hill, introduction to "Winstanley: The Law of Freedom and Other Writings", op cit. p58.

This comment, it seems to me, is highly contentious with regard to Traherne, who, although he remained an Anglican clergyman to his death, espoused ideas which go far beyond the limits of theological respectability, as we have seen, and was able to "break the bonds of eternal hell" by insisting that such a state is essentially mental, and therefore changeable.

The emphasis both writers place on childhood innocence is crucial here, and Winstanley's detailed yet precise examination in "The Fire in the Bush" is worthy of considerable quotation, for we can see the roots of Traherne's position in Winstanley's radicalism, and certain elements of Winstanley's exposition can clarify Traherne's philosophy. Winstanley sees childhood innocence as

> "the image of God, is plain-heartedness without guile, quiet, patient, chaste, loving, without envy: yet through weakness is flexible and open to temptation and change",

for

> "this innocent estate is the image of God, but not the strength and life of God".

In other words, the state of Eden is experienced by every human being, as Winstanley makes abundantly clear:

> "this is the first estate of mankind or the living soul in his innocence, and you need not look back six thousand years to find it; for every single man and woman passes through it".

This combination of awareness of the true value of innocence with a realistic appraisal of its weakness in the face of weighty pressures should be familiar from our previous examination of Traherne's thought, and is entirely different in emphasis from Vaughan's view. Winstanley insists that "though there be self-love, yet there is no hatred towards others in it, but a quiet content to let others live too" - a state of being "full of peace while a man is in it; but it is a state like wax, flexible and easy to take any impression". Certainly there is no

nostalgic idealism here. As the child grows up, he re-lives the Biblical fall, thus making his original innocence all the more remarkable and valuable; Winstanley's description of this process is very near to Traherne's own, as he writes:

> "Look upon a child that is new born, or till he grows up to some few years: he is innocent, harmless, humble, patient, gentle, easy to be entreated, not envious; and this is Adam, or mankind in his innocence; and this continues till outward objects entice him to pleasure or seek content without him - And when he consents, or suffers the imaginary covetousness within to close with the objects, then he falls and is taken captive, and falls lower and lower".

This fall is threefold: firstly the "lust of the eye" which leads to intense covetousness and the "joy of envy, which does perish again and ends in vexation"; secondly, the "lust of the flesh", in the sense that "those objects which are for the preservation and delight of mankind he immoderately uses, and by his excess destroys himself and them too"; and finally, that which perhaps does most to end innocence, "the pride of life", whereby man is intent on "looking upon himself as a god above others" (pp248-257).

For Winstanley, as for Traherne, the need for grace, inspired by Christ, is paramount, for

> "the whole earth we see is corrupt, and it cannot be purged by the hand of creatures for all creatures lie under the curse and groan to be delivered, and the more they strive, the more they entangle themselves in the mind, because it must be the hand of the Lord alone that must do it".

Thus the figure of Christ becomes the fulcrum for the liberation process for each and every person: "your saviour must be a power within you, to deliver you from that bondage within". The impact of this Christian solution is revolutionary and fundamentally disturbing, in the way that Traherne's own dialectical thought is. For Winstanley "this power of Christ takes away all peace from the flesh, and will not suffer any part of the creation to lie under a false peace any longer". It is significant that in the movement towards redemption, human

innocence is not the end itself, but plays an essential part. "The day of Christ", which will make "all things new and so making peace" is indeed ushered in

> "first by bringing mankind back again to his estate of innocence and plain-heartedness, and so in the eye of the world is a fool, before he be made wise; then secondly he rises up in power and glory, and makes man one with himself, and sets him down in rest never to fall again".

It is the spirit of freedom for which Christ stands, and Winstanley, like Traherne, emphasises the existential nature of man's freedom to choose for himself, the quality of perception crucially influencing the development of the spiritual character:

> "If your own eye be dark ... then all the actions of your body towards others are in darkness and builders up of selfishness, which is the one power you yet live in. But if your eye be truly single and full of light, then the light power wholly rules in you, and actions of your outward man will be full of light and life and love towards every single branch of the whole creation" (pp257-263).

If this freedom can be used creatively, the duality of private interest and public good - the morality of conflict between the two - can be transcended. Like Traherne, Winstanley reacted against the contemporary preoccupation with sin and guilt, realising that such matters are of relatively minor importance when compared to the immense possibilities open to the fully awakened consciousness. As Fox noted in his "Journal", such a reaction was all important during a time when "all professions stood in a beastly spirit and nature, pleading for sin and body of sin and imperfection as long as they lived"[134]. The combination of love with reason as the essential means towards liberation is reminiscent of Traherne's concept of "Highest Reason", although Winstanley, practical founder of the anarchistic "Digger" communities, was more concerned with the mechanics of such a

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[134]George Fox, quoted by Christopher Hill, "The World Turned Upside Down", op cit. p169.

combination in terms of socialistic organisation; as Christopher Hill points out,

> "for him the inner light or Reason is what tells a man that he must do unto others as he would they should do unto him: that he must co-operate. So he ... really transcended the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism through his vision of a society based on communal cultivation and mutual support"[135].

Reason in this sense is indeed the inner light of God in man; it serves to link the microcosm with the macro-cosmic law of the universe - God Himself - and it may well be that both Winstanley and Traherne derive this element in their thought from the Hermetic tradition of God as universal reason, constantly flowing to and from highest and lowest. As Winstanley explains,

> "This tree of life, I say, is Universal love, which our age calls righteous conscience or pure reason; or the seed of life that lies under the clods of earth, which in his time is now rising up to bruise the serpent's head, and to cast that imaginary murderer out of creation".

It is true that for Winstanley there is a greater sense of conflict than for Traherne - the sort of mental conflict which would also characterise Blake's symbolism - possibly arising out of his actual closeness to the real and terrifying conflict as the Diggers were persecuted by officialdom, but the essential unity of love and reason must be similar. Likewise, in Winstanley's symbolic language, the "serpent's head" which universal love must destroy is similar for both philosophers: the limited self which confuses the true, inner life of the spirit with outward power and acquisition. Thus Winstanley observed of contemporary society,

> "everyone looks upon a god and a ruler without him",

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[135]Christopher Hill, ibid. p372.

yet

> "they that live upon outward objects are filled with inward trouble ... slavish fear, evil surmising, sense of misery, sometimes angry, sometimes ready to despair and to curse the day of his birth, his soul takes pleasure in nothing without, and yet hath no peace within" (pp233-242).

Insofar as the mystic quests for unity to be achieved out of a world of division and fragmentation, both Winstanley and Traherne can be accurately termed mystics. In particular, both writers are insistent upon the essential unity of Creator and creation. Winstanley writes that

> "the body of Christ is where the Father is, in the earth, purifying the earth: and his spirit has entered into the whole creation, which is the heavenly glory where the father dwells".

Christopher Hill notes perceptively that "the idea of God as immanent within the whole material creation compares very interestingly with Traherne's later development of the same theme"[136], and indeed the whole emphasis of Traherne's later development is on correct enjoyment of the world and our life upon it as God's gift. Stemming from this perception of unity is a plea for unity of theory and practice, common to both writers, although, as could be expected, with Winstanley more directly concerned with political and social activities. The fusion of ends and means, for example, is insisted upon by Winstanley, specifically here with regard to violence: "freedom gotten by the sword is an established bondage to some part or other of the creation"[137]. The principle is developed in a Christian context in "Fire in the Bush", Winstanley pleading passionately and eloquently for active non-violence as symbolised by Christ,

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[136]C. Hill, ibid. p140.

[137]G. Winstanley, "The Saint's Paradise", 1648, in the previously cited edition of his work, p40.

> "but I mean Christ levelling, who fights against you by the sword of love, patience and truth ... For Christ came not to destroy but to save...".

The similarities between Winstanley and Traherne are, I feel significant and help us to understand the nature of Traherne's quest for human liberation of mind and body. It is true, as I have tried to show, that Winstanley's views are more directly concerned with political radicalism. It would be hard to reconcile his anti-clericalism, for example, with Traherne's position as an Anglican cleric, for

> "one of the most powerful of [Winstanley's] passions is hatred of parsons and state church ... parsons are paid to do a job that no-one should be paid for; and they use their privileged position to impose standards of conduct upon others"[138].

Yet, essentially, the theology and world-view are similar. Winstanley's thought is directed towards political and social activism, in response to the revolutionary circumstances of the late 1640's; in Traherne's case, a distinctive temperament and calmer circumstances contribute to a rather more serene and spiritual expression. In fundamental belief, the two writers complement each other beautifully and to great effect.

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6. Concluding Thoughts.

I mentioned earlier the great implications of Traherne's insistence on the liberation of the senses, as a glorious project in its own right, certainly, but also as a prerequisite for the liberation of the soul and of the world itself: in essence, of all creation. I have tried to show just how tremendous and profound is Traherne's achievement in this sense. His belief, shining through all his prose and poetry and particularly striking in the "Centuries", is in the totality of experience, beyond any alienating distinction between subject and object of perception, and, to be strictly accurate, beyond experience in the normal sense with its implications of time and distinctions. Such is the true meaning of the liberating quality I have found overwhelming in Traherne's work.

To emphasise this sense of mission and accomplishment, Traherne quotes extensively and with abundant enthusiasm from the "Psalms", finding in David a true soul mate:

> "When I saw those objects celebrated in his Psalms which God and Nature had proposed to me, and which I thought chance only presented to my view, you cannot imagine how unspeakably I was delighted to see so glorious a person, so great a prince, so divine a sage, that was a man after God's own heart, by the testimony of God Himself, rejoicing in the same things, meditating on the same, and praising God for the same". (C3,70).

The senses, bound to nature, are the starting point of the quest for total liberation, and, as I have tried to show, a source of joy also:

> "I perceived we were led by one Spirit, and that following the clue of Nature into this labyrinth, I was brought into the midst of celestial joys". (C3,70).

Traherne's view, earthly existence - including the proper use of the senses - is enhanced magnificently by a sense of divinity. Thus,

> "It needeth nothing but the sense of God to inherit all things. We must borrow and derive it from Him by seeing His, and aspiring after it. Do but clothe yourself with Divine resentments and the world shall be to you the valley of vision, and all the nations and kingdoms of the world shall appear in splendour and celestial glory". (C3,84).

The intense thirst for vision Traherne shares with the Psalmist David, as is made clear in the following meditation's quotation from the Psalms: "My soul thirsteth for Thee, my flesh longeth for Thee in a dry and thirsty land where no water is". (C3,86). Once fulfilled, the thirst quenched, man is in a position to become the centre of divinity, both sensuous and spiritual:

> "When we see the glory of His wisdom and goodness and His power exerted, then we see His glory. And these we cannot see till we see their works. When therefore we see His works, in them as in a mirror we see His glory" (C3,86).

Although the freshness and originality of Traherne's words are everywhere apparent, my quotations throughout this study from Bonaventure, the "Cloud of Unknowing", Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Thomas à Kempis, Meister Eckhart, all preceding Traherne; from Vaughan, Winstanley and Fox, approximately contemporary; and from later thinkers such as William Blake, Carl Gustav Jung and Aldous Huxley have, I hope, shown him to be an important part of a great tradition which, despite its modulations and vagaries, is always concerned ultimately with the freedom of the human spirit while on earth. Traherne gratefully acknowledges his debt to this tradition and seems to realise his own part in its continuance, again referring directly to the Psalms:

> "In the 78th psalm, he commandeth all ages to record the ancient ways of God, and recommendeth them to our meditation, showing the ordinance of God, that fathers should teach their children, and they another generation: which certainly since they are not to be seen in the visible world, but only in the memory and minds of men. The memory and mind are a strange region of celestial light, and a wonderful place, as well as a large and sublime one, in which they may be seen. What is contained in the souls of men being as visible to us as the very heavens". (C3,89).

In "Highest Reason", that combination of rational thought with the intensely visionary apprehension of existence, Traherne has formulated the perfect tool to achieve liberation. The force of his dialectical method is incisive, disturbing in its honesty, and ultimately unifying. Desire, perceived as the essence of life in a very modern sense, is to be transformed by such a method, restoring the "pristine liberty" remembered by Traherne (C3,95), but on an unassailable level. The fully social implications of Traherne's philosophy, which can be seen clearly through the comparison to Winstanley, are profoundly radical, although Traherne himself seems to have felt no need to apply the consequences of his ideas to society. The combination of robust realism concerning the world with an insistence on man's visionary potential makes this radicalism urgently relevant to the modern world. The final lines of the "Centuries" speak for themselves, as clearly now as then:

> "The essence of God therefore being all light and knowledge, love and goodness, care and providence, felicity and glory, a pure and simple Act, it is present in its operations, and by these Acts which it eternally exerteth is wholly busied in all parts and places of His dominion, perfecting and completing our bliss and happiness". (C5,10).

## 7. Bibliography

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